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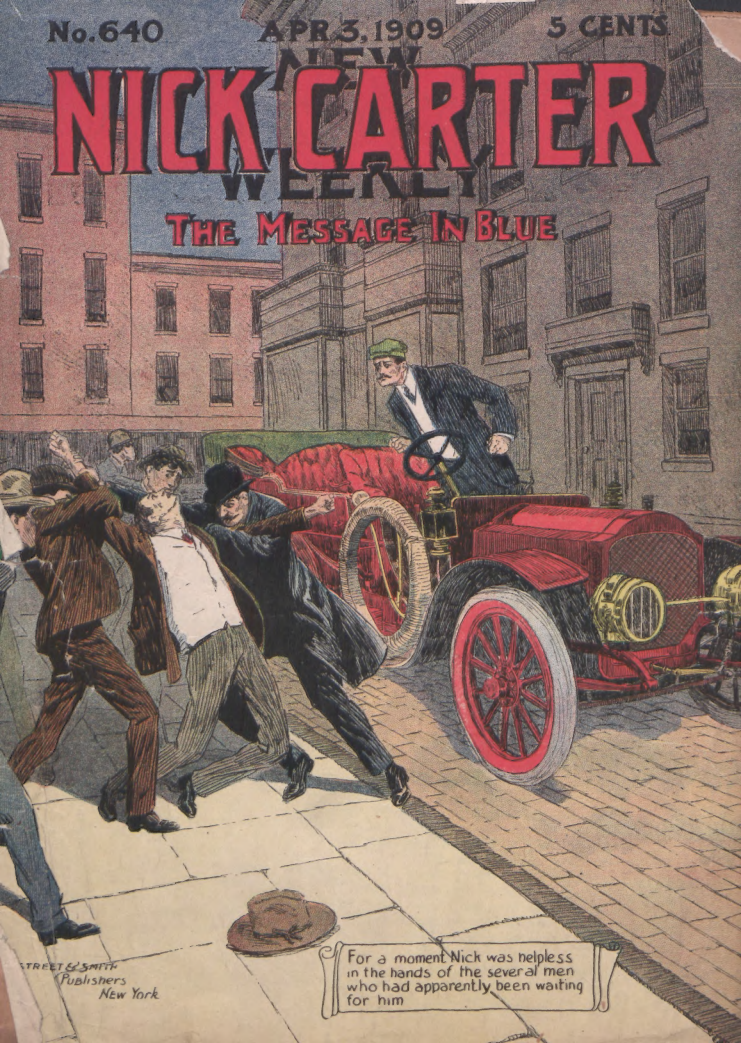
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE MESSAGE IN BLUE



For a moment Nick was helpless in the hands of the several men who had apparently been waiting for him

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Message in Blue

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CLUE TO A VAST CONSPIRACY.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

FIVE MYSTERIOUS MEN.

Nick Carter's second assistant, Patsy Garvan, was seated in the tonneau of the detective's automobile, that had been drawn up at the curb near that entrance to Central Park which is located at Eighth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street.

Danny was in the chauffeur's place, under the wheel, and Patsy was leaning idly back in his comfortable seat, smoking a cigar, and otherwise given up to a reflective mood. The engine of the automobile was stilled, and the aspect of the car was that of awaiting the arrival of some expected person.

Patsy was indulging in day-dreams while he smoked, gazing through half-closed lids across Columbus Circle toward the semicircular row of buildings opposite. It was the sort of sweeping glance which observed nothing definitely, but which took in all that was going on within his range of vision.

He was conscious of the passage up and down of the Eighth Avenue cars, the many automobiles bound in either direction, and of the throng of people who came and went intermittently, sometimes in crowds, and frequently in the form of straggling individuals, or small groups of persons.

From time to time the platform around the fence, which encloses the statue of Columbus, was partly filled with people, and again it would be almost deserted; and it was upon this part of the scene that Patsy's glance presently became riveted with an expression of unmistakable interest.

"That's the third chap I have seen do that," he muttered to himself; and without changing his attitude, or otherwise denoting that he had observed anything to attract his attention, he still devoted it more concisely to that particular point.

Five minutes more passed, and then Patsy slowly straightened himself, bending forward to observe more closely the actions of a man who had crossed the surrounding roadway to the statue, and who approached the iron railing which surrounded it, with the air of one who had a well-defined purpose in view.

Patsy had guessed from the manner of this person, as he crossed from the direction of the Circle Theater toward the statue, that he was to be the fourth of the persons whose conduct had attracted the young detective's attention; and in this he was not mistaken.

The man walked deliberately to the fence, and turned to lean against it for a moment while he gazed searchingly around him in every direction, as if to discover if any one were observing him; after which, apparently satisfied that he was unobserved, he turned quickly and made several chalk-marks upon the iron railing.

Patsy could not, from that distance, determine exactly what those chalk-marks were, although he could see well enough to be convinced that the man had

made some figures on the fence; and the young detective leaned farther forward, in eagerness, to watch the subsequent proceedings.

The stranger, having made the marks, turned about and stood for a moment with his back toward them, during an interval in which one might have counted twenty slowly, and then with the same deliberation that had marked his previous movements, he wheeled about once more, and as carefully obliterated every mark he had made.

That done, he walked away, crossing the Circle, and presently disappearing down Eighth Avenue.

Patsy resumed his former position of leaning back against the cushions of the car, and he carefully relighted his cigar, which had gone out.

"That makes four," he said to himself. "It's odd, too. I wonder what it can all be about? It looks to me very much like some sort of concerted action, and as if the chalk-marks against the iron railing were signals, which one has to make and then obliterate——"

He stopped suddenly in his meditation, for at that instant he discovered a fifth man, the character of whose approach suggested that his errand was the same as the others had been; and again the young detective was not mistaken.

The fifth individual conducted himself differently from what any of the others had done.

Unlike his predecessors, he came from the park entrance. He was a tall, compactly built man, with the air and attitude of one who was determined and direct in all that he had to do; and now he crossed the space which separated him from the statue with a purposeful air, like one who was bent upon a stated errand, and who had no thought whatever but in its consummation.

He walked deliberately to the iron railing, as the others had done, but unlike them did not turn about to notice if he were observed.

At, or near, the selfsame location where the others had made their marks, this man made his, but there was a difference in them which instantly added to the interest that Patsy already felt in the proceedings.

This man made his chalk-marks in red; and whatever they were, figures, hieroglyphics, or otherwise, he instantly erased them, making only one at a time, and rubbing it out before he made another.

He continued this sort of employment for several moments, during which the young detective counted seven distinct performances of the kind; and then, as abruptly as he had approached the spot, he turned away and lost himself in the crowds, as the others had done before him.

It was all accomplished with such purposeful deliberation that Patsy could not feel otherwise than astonished; and a moment after the disappearance of the man who had made the red marks, the young detective regretted that he had not thought quickly enough to leap from the car and follow him.

But why? What reason on earth could there be, or what excuse could Patrick Garvan suggest to himself, for following a man simply because he had made a few indistinguishable chalk-marks against the iron railing which surrounds the white pillar at Columbus Circle?

The mere fact that he was the fifth man who had done the same thing might or might not be significant.

Where one is trained in a certain walk of life, as Patsy had been trained from his childhood by Nick Carter, it becomes an instinctive quality on his part to question all things pertaining to the mysterious. It was just as natural for Patsy to regard with interest the proceedings he had observed, as it is for a hunting-dog to come to an instant stop, raise one foot, and remain motionless when it strikes the scent of game.

These men, who had appeared so strangely and who had made chalk-marks on the fence with such similitude of demeanor, were very evidently following out a line of conduct which had been carefully planned beforehand. This much, Patsy believed, was certain; but why it should be so, and what sort of signficance might be attached to the proceedings, was as much a mystery to him, at that moment, as it is to you who read this description, at this one.

But Patsy had permitted this last man to go out of his sight and had not thought of following him to observe him more closely, until it was too late to do so. However, the young detective's curiosity was thoroughly aroused now; and if a sixth man should appear, he decided that he would begin some sort of investigation, if for no other reason than to satisfy and answer that interrogation-point which had arisen in his mind.

The sixth man, however, did not appear, and after ten minutes more of waiting, Patsy suddenly had an idea.

"Danny," he said, leaning forward and addressing the chauffeur, "how long did the chief tell you to wait here for him?"

"He told me to wait until he came," was the reply. "We have already been here an hour, Danny, and I am going to take a walk around the Circle. If the chief should come while I am gone, you need not wait to pick me up, unless I am somewhere in sight. He didn't expect me here, anyhow, and there is something else I wish to do."

Without waiting for further comment on the part of the chauffeur, Patsy leaped from the car and crossed the Circle rapidly toward a little store, where he purchased some pieces of chalk, one in white, one in red, and a third one in blue; he was determined to try an experiment out of which he hoped he might at least derive some amusement.

Of the five men who had appeared and made their marks on the iron railing around the statue, four had used white chalk, and the fifth one red, and so, when presently Patsy approached the spot in much the same manner that the others had used, he held a bit of white chalk concealed in the palm of his hand, and having reached the desired spot, he deliberately made the

well-known figures 4-11-44 with the white chalk against the iron railing.

He permitted these figures to remain there while he turned about and gazed for a moment in several directions, as the others had done, and then, having obliterated them, he started away in the direction of Eighth Avenue, like his predecessors of the chalk-marks.

Passing away from the statue down that thoroughfare, he had arrived at the corner of Fifty-eighth Street, and was about to turn around to retrace his steps, when a person stepped from a doorway and addressed him.

He was a man fashionably attired, swarthy of visage, and somewhat suggesting a foreigner. He paused directly in front of Patsy, so that the latter had to stop, and said:

"This is a fine day, sir. I was requested to hand you this envelope in the hope that you might profit by its contents."

As he spoke he extended an envelope toward Patsy. It had not been sealed, and the flap of it was widely open; and without waiting for Patsy to make any reply, the man turned on his heel and walked rapidly through Fifty-eighth Street.

The first impulse of the young detective was to follow; his second, and a better one probably, was to shrug his shoulders, and then, with the envelope in his hand, he stepped inside a cigar store, where, having made a purchase, he drew out the contents of the envelope which had been given to him so strangely.

It contained a slip of paper, upon which was written these words:

"Northeast corner Twenty-sixth Street and Madison Avenue, three-thirty p. m. Approach from the Southwest."

That was all. There was no superscription, and no signature. The writing was simple and plain, although there was a touch of the foreign about its character, as if the person who did it had not been educated in American schools.

It was not yet eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and, therefore, if Patsy were to keep the appointment suggested by the contents of the envelope he had received, there was ample time to do so, and he retraced his steps slowly toward the Circle, wondering what all this mystery could suggest, and what it might mean.

He crossed straight to the iron railing, again resolved to stand there for a time, and that if another should appear who made chalk-marks on the fence, to follow and discover if that person also was made the recipient of a mysterious envelope.

None came, however, and presently, smiling to himself as he did so, Patsy wheeled about, and with the red chalk in his hand, wrote his own initials, "P. G.," against the iron fence.

He repeated this several times, obliterating them as rapidly as he made them, and counting the time as he had counted them when he saw the fifth man of those who had interested him make the marks in red.

So he wrote "P. G." and rubbed it out again, seven times in succession, and then once more started away, this time passing rapidly down Eighth Avenue.

When he arrived near the place where he had been accosted by the mysterious stranger, he glanced around him, expecting to observe that person again, but this time he was nowhere to be seen, and Patsy had about made up his mind that the thing wasn't working out as it should have done, and he had passed onward to the other side of Fifty-eighth Street, when he was accosted by a person he had not seen before, but who confronted him in the same manner that the dark man had done.

"P. G.?"

It was all he said, but it was a question, and Patsy nodded and smiled, and replied:

"Yes."

"Follow me," said the stranger, and wheeled and walked rapidly away, down the avenue, to the corner of Fifty-seventh Street, where, as abruptly as had been his other motions, he turned squarely about and again confronted Patsy.

"How many?" he asked, using no preface to his question, but asking it with an abruptness which assumed that there would be as ready an answer.

"A dozen," replied Patsy, at random, not knowing what the answer should be, and, truth to tell, not caring; for he had started the experiment with no thought that it would lead to anything other than amusement.

But the man seemed satisfied with the answer that Patsy made, and although he expressed no surprise, there was something rather pleased and cordial in his demeanor as he thrust one hand into a pocket and produced an envelope, this time sealed, but which held no address upon it.

With a rapid gesture he placed it in Patsy's extended hand, for already the young detective had reached out to claim it, and then, with the exclamation, "I shall expect you," he turned and hurried away, as the other man had done.

Patsy remained in the middle of the sidewalk, quite astonished, and very much inclined to laugh, still holding the envelope in his hand, with the seal unbroken.

"Upon my word," he muttered, "this thing really begins to look like a mystery of some sort."

He ran his finger underneath the flap of the envelope and was about to tear it open, when he was startled by having a hand suddenly thrust forward over his shoulder, and that hand seized upon the envelope and tore it from his grasp.

Patsy wheeled about, surprised and somewhat angered by the character and method of the interruption, and found himself face to face with the dark-visaged, gentlemanly appearing person who had given him the first envelope.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLUE CRAYON.

Patsy, always quick to act in an emergency, lost no time in retaliating upon this stranger who had taken such a summary means of obtaining possession of the envelope.

The dark man had not yet had time to dispose of it in one of his pockets before Patsy had seized the wrist of the hand that held it, and so repossessed himself of the envelope and its contents.

It was rather a remarkable circumstance that happened in connection with this action on Patsy's part, and it impressed the young detective deeply when he thought upon it a few moments afterward, as he presently had opportunity to do.

It has been said that he seized the wrist of the hand that held the envelope, after it was snatched from him, and so repossessed himself of it almost instantly. In order to do so it was necessary that he should use his other hand, while still holding fast to the dark man's wrist.

Patsy's left hand, when he turned to face the man who had snatched the envelope, had been loosely in the side pocket of his coat, and he had been playing idly with the three pieces of chalk contained in that pocket; he had received the sealed envelope from the other man in his right hand, and as has been described, it was almost instantly snatched away from him.

Then, as he wheeled and grasped the man who had approached from behind, he withdrew his left hand from his pocket in order to seize the envelope again, and, in doing so, drew out with it one of the three pieces of chalk.

It was an unintentional act on the part of Patsy, for he had made the motion so quickly that he was not conscious of the fact that he held the blue square of chalk palmed in his left hand; but as he reached out and seized the envelope, the blue chalk fell to the pavement between the two men.

The remarkable circumstance referred to in a foregoing paragraph existed in the conduct and demeanor of the dark stranger the instant he espied the blue chalk.

Before that instant, his attitude had been one of thorough belligerency, and it is not to be doubted that but for the intervention of the cube of blue chalk, there might have been a street fight then and there, for Patsy's blood was up, as well as the stranger's.

But the appearance of the chalk changed all this, because of some hidden reason which Patsy could not define, and which he did not at the moment pause to consider.

As the chalk fell to the pavement between them, the dark man started backward with a sharp cry of consternation and amazement, and to Patsy's utter surprise, instantly drew himself to an attitude of military precision, and saluted.

Quick to take advantage of a circumstance, Patsy returned the salute, but he did it after a manner which spoke plainly of the condescension he felt in doing so.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the stranger said, in a low tone, and in a voice that was extremely pleasant and melodious. "I did not know; I did not understand."

Patsy, wise in his generation, was silent for a moment before he replied; and then he said:

"An apology is not necessary since you did not understand. Later, perhaps, you will know more."

The dark man saluted again, wheeled about, and walked away rapidly, leaving Patsy even more mystified than before.

He had hoped for an opportunity to draw the man out, and to get from him some expressions which would afford a clue of some kind to the strange proceedings of the morning; but none such were vouchsafed him.

Indeed, the men of the chalk seemed to be a strangely silent crew, who transacted all their business through the medium of colored marks on an iron fence, and by inexplicable sentences contained in envelopes.

For a time after the stranger withdrew, Patsy remained where he was, wondering if there would be any further interruptions; and then he bethought himself of the envelope he held, with the seal still unbroken.

His recent experience suggested that it was unwise to open it until he had withdrawn to some place of seclusion, so he stepped inside a convenient hallway, and presently held in his hand a small square of paper that had been folded once, and upon which was written the words:

"Beneath the arch at Washington Square at eight-thirty to-night."

"Gee!" said Patsy, smiling. "It begins to look as if I was going to have my hands full of engagements, if I follow out this chalk business. I wonder what it's all about, anyhow? The fellows who made the white marks are to show up at the corner of Madison Avenue and Twenty-sixth Street at three-thirty, and the one chap who made the red chalk-mark is invited to be at the Washington Arch at eight-thirty; and then, as if to make the circumstances still more puzzling, the Chesterfieldian chap with the snappy black eyes almost faints away when he discovers a piece of blue chalk in my possession; and that reminds me that I forgot to recover it."

He hurried back to the spot where the blue chalk had been dropped, and spent a few moments in looking for it; but it had disappeared, and no trace of it was left, save only a smudge of blue upon the stones, where persons in passing had trodden upon some of the crumbled pieces of it.

Patsy was still regarding these intently, although not thinking of them particularly, when he felt a touch upon his arm, and turning saw a woman, richly dressed

but closely veiled—and yet not so closely but that he could see the sparkle of her eyes through the meshes.

"Are you interested in the blue marks on the pavement, señor?" she asked, with just a trace of foreign accent in her voice; and as she spoke she pointed downward, toward the smudge of blue that was now between them.

"I think," said Patsy, speaking slowly, so that he could choose his words; "I think that I was wondering why they were there. Possibly, madam, you can tell me, since you have inquired about them."

"You do not know?" she asked, and there was restraint in her voice, as if she were in doubt whether he spoke the truth or not, in making his declaration.

"I know so little, señora," he replied, purposely adopting her own form of expression. "I hope soon to know more, however."

For a moment after hearing this reply, the woman gazed intently upon Patsy through the meshes of her veil, as if she were undecided how to accept his declaration, and uncertain how to proceed, herself.

Patsy, being equally at fault, and knowing no more about the circumstances associated with the play he was making than those who read this know, contented himself by remaining silent, and thus placing the burden of conversation upon the woman.

He regarded her intently, while he was trying to study out, in that short interval, what sort of person she might be; and he arrived at the quick decision that she was at least a lady of education and refinement, and probably of environment, as well. He knew, also, that she was young. The contour of her figure, her poise, and the character of her dress, betokened that much; and it was a natural conclusion that she was also more or less comely and attractive.

"We attract attention by standing here, señor," she said to him presently, and in a tone so low that others, passing, might not hear. "Will you walk a little way with me?"

Without waiting for a reply, she turned down the avenue, and Patsy stepped along beside her, wondering what new adventure was to be brought about through the interest he had already manifested in the chalk-marks.

They had walked nearly a block in this manner, and in utter silence, when she asked him abruptly:

"Shall you attend the meeting to-night?"

"I rather expect to, señora—or shall I say señorita?" he replied, purposely following her question by another one, thinking by that means to draw her out still more; but she let the query pass unheeded, and asked another one herself.

"For what hour is the meeting arranged?" was her query.

"I am told to report at eight-thirty," he replied evasively; and again she turned to peer at him intently through the meshes of her veil.

"Eight-thirty?" she said, and Patsy could have sworn that she was laughing; but whether it was with amusement, or because of some other impulse, he could not determine.

Again they walked along in silence, and so arrived at the next corner, where the woman stopped and turned, facing him.

"You are not what you seem, nor the man whom I took you to be," she said, with decision in her tone. "I can see that quite plainly, now. You are not what you seem to be, sir. I doubt if you have much more information at your disposal than——"

She paused in her speech, and when, after a considerable pause, she did not offer to continue, Patsy asked:

"Than whom?"

"Than that of the white chalk," she replied enigmatically; and this time there was no doubt that she laughed. "I perceive that you are not very wise, sir. You are not as well-informed as I supposed you to be. I do not know who you are, or what you are, but possibly you may hear from me again."

She turned about, and would have left the young detective had he not reached forth a detaining hand.

"Please wait," he said.

For an instant she paused and faced him, drawing herself up haughtily as she did so; and then, without a word of reply, but with a gesture which said as plainly as words could have done that he should not dare to attempt to question her further, she walked rapidly away, leaving the young detective again alone.

It was Patsy's impulse to follow her, and doubtless he would have done so but for the reluctance he felt to follow any woman along the streets of New York, unless it were plainly his duty to do so; and he did not consider that he had as yet any duty to perform in this particular case.

He had stumbled upon some sort of a mystery, but what it involved, or why it existed at all, he had absolutely no means of determining.

Thus far in the proceedings he had come in contact with two mysterious men, and one mysterious woman, all of foreign aspect and demeanor, but all of whom spoke perfect English, and all of whom conducted themselves as gentlemen and ladies should do.

He stood where the woman left him, watching her as she hurried down the avenue to the next street, where she disappeared around the corner, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he turned and retraced his steps toward the statue, his idea at the moment being to return to the automobile and Danny, and to bother himself no more concerning the episode of the chalk-marks.

However, when he arrived in the vicinity of the Circle, the automobile had disappeared, and he judged that Nick Carter, for whom it had been waiting, had arrived, and that Danny had taken him away.

Little incidents like that one are often the turning-point in a man's career, and may change the history of a person's life.

It is certain that this one brought about the investigation of the mysterious chalk-marks, which would

never have been undertaken had the automobile been obliged to wait for Nick Carter five minutes longer than it did. For in that case, Patsy would have entered it, and it is doubtful if the episode of the chalk would have been considered other than a joke.

As it was, when Patsy saw that Danny had gone, he turned at an acute angle from the direction he had been following, and took his course a second time to the little store where he had purchased the chalk; there he bought a second piece of the blue crayon.

The closing incidents of his last experience had convinced Patsy that the blue chalk was somehow of more importance than the other colors, and so, determined upon a last experiment, he made his way straight across the square, toward the iron railing near its center, intent upon making some marks in blue, where they would be seen, as the red and white ones had been.

CHAPTER III.

THE MESSAGE IN BLUE.

As Patsy approached the iron fence which surrounds the pillar that supports the figure of Columbus, he held the piece of blue crayon he had purchased conspicuously between the finger and thumb of his right hand, in order that if any one were watching his approach, or the approach of any person who might be bent on a like errand, the chalk would be seen and his actions would be anticipated.

As he stepped upon the coping which surrounds the place, he paused near the edge of it, and turned, facing toward the park; then deliberately he walked all the way around the edge of the coping until he arrived again at the point of beginning.

There he about-faced, as a military man would express it, and strode straight across to the iron railing, where, without premeditation concerning what he should write, he made the figures in blue, which announced the appointed hour of the meeting that evening, under the Washington arch.

"8:30," he wrote, and then stood back and stepped away from it, looking at the figures he had made, after which he erased them with his handkerchief; and then, with a chuckle, he strode a quarter of the way around the circle of the fence, and repeated the operation.

He conducted himself exactly as he had done in the first instance, and he continued to repeat this performance until he had made the figures and erased them at the four points of compass surrounding the statue.

That done, he stood back idly, waiting for something to happen.

But nothing happened.

Minute after minute passed, until Patsy's naturally impatient character asserted itself, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, he flung the blue crayon from him, saw it roll into the middle of one of the car-tracks, and was starting away, to leave the place for good, and to forget the incidents of the morning, when he saw a man spring from the platform of a car, bound in the opposite direction, seize the chalk, and then come rapidly toward him.

Patsy waited.

The man came directly up to him without hesitation, and extended the blue crayon, holding it, unclasped, in the palm of his right hand.

"I think, sir, that you lost something," he said.

Patsy had to confess himself nonplused at the moment.

He did not know just what answer to make.

The whole circumstance was so perplexing, and so utterly unusual.

But without any hesitation that was apparent, he reached out and took the chalk from the palm of the extended hand, and said:

"Thank you."

Then he dropped it into his coat pocket, whereupon the man who had returned the chalk to him made what appeared to the young detective to be a significant gesture, for he deliberately moistened the tip of his middle finger with his tongue and then drew it across his eyebrows one after the other, first covering the right one and then the left.

Patsy knew that this must be some sort of signal, but he did not know how to reply to it.

To repeat the gesture after the man would have been folly, for no secret sign is ever given where the answer to it is the same as the question, and so Patsy made no returning gesture whatever, but stood smilingly regarding the stranger, whose entire demeanor had been that of a gentleman.

The latter was the first to speak.

"I see that you do not understand me," he said.

"I'm afraid not," Patsy admitted.

"You threw the blue chalk away, did you not?"

"Yes."

"After making certain marks upon the iron railing yonder?"

"I believe that I was foolish enough to do so; yes."

"The marks were also significant, were they not?" queried the stranger, with a smile, but, nevertheless, in a manner which demanded a reply.

"That is as it may be," replied Patsy. "If they had any significance to you, sir, you are welcome to make whatever use of it you please."

"It is not the first time you have made use of chalk, to make marks upon the fence, yonder, is it?"

"No," said Patsy, and he laughed outright this time. "I have been conducting myself like a schoolboy for the better part of an hour, and I had just determined to become a man again, when you brought back to me the piece of crayon I had thrown away."

For a moment the stranger regarded Patsy with an intentness that was somewhat disconcerting, and with slow deliberation he said:

"It is always a wise proceeding to ignore things which do not concern us. Your actions have inter-

ested me for some little time, and if you have ever traveled in the West you will know that they have a maxim in that part of the country which says: A man who minds his own business has his hands full."

What reply Patsy would have made to this remark can never be determined, for the man gave him no opportunity to say a word. He turned and sprang upon a passing car, so that Patsy could not have dogged his footsteps had he wished to do so, for the man would instantly have known that he was followed.

It was for this reason that Patsy followed out his first intention of returning home, and he crossed the Circle to the south side of Fifty-ninth Street, presently turning down Fifth Avenue.

The day was a fine one and he preferred to walk, and so he strolled along leisurely, observing without noticing particularly the people and vehicles that passed him along that thoroughfare.

He had proceeded in this manner to the corner of Thirtieth Street, and was about to turn to cross the avenue, when, directly ahead of him, a carriage drew up before the front entrance to the Holland House. A gentleman sprang from it, and turned to assist a lady to alight, and she stepped down so that she stood directly facing Patsy, who was twenty or thirty feet distant from them.

With a start he recognized, or believed that he did so, the young woman who had accosted him on Eighth Avenue, when he had been studying the smudge of blue, beneath him, on the pavement.

With an impulse that he could not have defined at the moment, Patsy's hand flew quickly to his hat, and he raised it as the woman's eyes, for an instant only, met his own.

He wondered if it was a flash of recognition, or of amazed indignation, that she bestowed upon him when he saluted her; but whatever it was, she made no returning gesture, and her gaze was instantly withdrawn, and Patsy remained where he was, watching the woman as she walked beside her companion into the hotel.

He had thought, for an instant, that he might have been mistaken in her identity, and that after all she was not the same person with whom he had spoken on Eighth Avenue; but the costume was almost the same, if not entirely so, Patsy thought. In fact, the only difference that he could determine upon in that one glance was in the veil the woman wore. She of Eighth Avenue had been more thickly veiled than this one, so that her features had been much less plainly seen. The veil worn by the woman who had just passed into the hotel was of the thinnest and most transparent character, and served only to accentuate the beauty of her features and the flash of her brilliant eyes.

Truly, the morning had been one of unusual occurrences, and chuckling over the strangeness of it all, Patsy crossed the avenue and passed through Thirtieth Street, eastward, on his way home.

He expected to find Nick Carter at the house, but the detective had not arrived as yet, and so Patsy seated himself in the library to read and smoke, and await the coming of his chief.

When luncheon was announced, within a short time after Patsy's return, he found that he had to partake of it alone, since Nick Carter and Chick were both absent, and even Adelina, Patsy's wife, had gone out on a shopping tour, so Joseph informed him. He had eaten luncheon, and was in the act of leaving the table, when Joseph appeared, bearing a sealed envelope, which he handed to Patsy, saying as he did so:

"This was just now left at the door for you, sir, and the person who brought it said that I was to give it to the gentleman who made the chalk-marks against the iron fence. He went away before I could ask him a question, and so I have brought it directly to you, Mr. Garvan."

"All right," said Patsy, laughing. "I'm It, Joseph."

He took the envelope, and while Joseph stood waiting, broke the seal.

He read as follows:

"You have received one warning already. Let this be another one. Do not meddle with things which do not concern you. A pitcher sometimes goes to the well too often. If there was method in your madness of this forenoon, forget it and drop it. If what you did was the result of accident, remember the maxim about minding your own business. The people who are concerned with the circumstances of this morning will brook no interference from any person or persons."

There was no superscription; there was no signature.

The envelope which contained the message was of the same shade of blue as the crayon which Patsy had used to mark upon the iron railing surrounding the statue of Columbus; the message was written on paper of the same hue.

The writing was fine and perfect, almost like engraving, and there had been apparently no attempt to disguise it in any way.

Patsy, who had been on the point of dismissing the entire subject from his mind, as a mere incident of the day not of sufficient importance to demand more attention, was now more greatly mystified than ever, and he received a renewed impulse to investigate this mysterious affair, because of the character and the wording of the message just received.

If you will pause a minute to regard the circumstances from your own standpoint, as you read this, you will realize that but for the profession which Patsy followed, the incident should not, and probably would not, have interested him at all.

But being, by profession, an investigator of mysteries, and having one or more such affairs always at hand for solution, a new case which presented the strange and unusual features that this one did became peculiarly attractive; and that, in spite of the fact that there was absolutely nothing as yet to indicate that

Patsy should be concerned about it. Nevertheless, he was most deeply interested.

He read the message two or three times, and then remembered that Joseph was standing at the doorway, waiting.

"What sort of a person was it who brought this message, Joseph?" he asked.

"Just a man, sir; nothing more. A working man, I should say."

"Probably some one who was hired, along the street, to deliver it," said Patsy, and he waved his hand for Joseph to leave.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that the time was approaching two o'clock, and recalling the circumstance of the first envelope he had received, after making the white chalk-marks, he determined to go at once to Madison Square, and to station himself where he should pass the next hour and a half in watching the corner where the first written message had told him to appear at three-thirty that afternoon.

He strolled slowly down the avenue, having no idea whatever that he was followed or observed, and passed presently into Madison Square, where he seated himself on a bench from which he could command a view of the corner that interested him.

The case, if case it could be called, had not as yet taken upon itself sufficient importance to suggest to the young detective that he was watched, or spied upon, notwithstanding the message he had received in the blue envelope; and, therefore, he did not notice particularly a person who presently approached and dropped down upon the same bench, but at the other end of it, leaving a space of a few feet between them.

The day was a pleasant one, and Patsy had brought along a paper, which he now unfolded and held before him, ostensibly reading it, but in reality casting frequent and furtive glances toward the corner in question.

The better part of an hour passed in this manner, and Patsy was beginning to think that the time was approaching for developments, if any were to occur, when a closed hack drew up against the curb a few feet away from the northwest corner of Twenty-sixth Street and Madison Avenue, and stood there, as if awaiting a passenger.

Patsy watched it idly, observing it without being interested, and he saw the driver get down, go to the door, open it, and appear to lean for a moment inside the hack. Then the man withdrew, and turned about, looking eagerly up and down the street as if in search of some one, and he continued those actions, turning first in one direction and then another, until at last he faced the bench in the square upon which Patsy was seated.

The young detective saw the man turn and say something further, apparently to some person inside the hack, and then, leaving the door swinging open, he darted across Twenty-sixth Street directly toward the place where the young detective was seated, approaching him at a run.

As the man drew near the bench, Patsy saw that he was excited; but he did not come too closely.

He stopped abruptly, and exclaimed:

"Oh, gentlemen, come quickly, if you please. My mistress is ill."

Without awaiting a reply, he turned and ran back toward the hack.

Patsy, and the other man who was seated on the bench near him, started to their feet simultaneously, and apparently with the same impulse rushed toward the hack with its door swinging open.

Whether it was by intention, or because Patsy was more fleet of foot, he certainly outdistanced the man who had occupied the bench with him, and when they reached the open door of the hack, Patsy was eight or ten feet in the lead.

Without pausing to consider what he was doing or what he might discover, the young detective leaped forward, and thrust his head and half his body inside the covered vehicle.

It was the last that the young detective remembered with any distinctness.

He knew that he received a violent blow from behind, and he was conscious of pitching forward into utter darkness.

That was all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY.

It was half-past three o'clock in the afternoon of that same day when Nick Carter entered his own house, having been deposited before the door by Danny, with the automobile.

The detective was somewhat preoccupied as he ran up the steps and made his way to his own study, where he presently rang for Joseph.

"I want Patsy," he said, when the latter appeared, "and I wish you to tell him to bring——"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Joseph, interrupting him, "but Mr. Garvan is out. He was home to luncheon, sir, but left the house about two o'clock, and has not returned."

"Did he leave any message? Do you know where he was going?"

"No, sir; he received a message of some sort which seemed to induce him to hasten."

"A message?" said Nick. "From whom?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What was the message?"

"I don't know that, either, sir."

"What's the matter with you, Joseph? Are you trying to be mysterious?"

"No, sir; but the message was rather a mysterious one. At least, I thought so at the time."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. I suppose it was something that Patsy has gone out to attend to. If

he should come in, I wish you to send him to me at once. Is Mrs. Garvan at home?"

"Yes, sir; she has just come in."

Nick dismissed Joseph, and hastened to the room which Patsy and his wife used as a private parlor, and as he entered, said to her:

"Adelina, I have just received information of a character which is so stupendous in its meaning as to be almost beyond credulity. I thought I would question you a little bit concerning some of the points about it, for the reason that I know you to be in constant communication with your friends and relatives in Argentina and Chili."

"Yes," she said, looking up in some surprise. "What can it be about?"

The detective seated himself upon a chair facing her, and continued:

"The matter is one which, if any importance attaches to it at all, is of the greatest moment imaginable. In a word, Adelina, it comprehends a coalition of several of the revolutionary parties of the South American countries into one, and it is aimed toward a reestablishment of an empire which is intended gradually to absorb every one of the South American republics. I want to know if, in any letters you have received from that part of the world, any mention has been made of things which would tend toward such an intrigue."

"No, indeed," she replied at once, and frankly. "I have never heard of any such thing at all."

"It is most amazing," said Nick. "Perhaps the more so because the plan, as adopted, seems to me to be entirely feasible."

"I can't imagine anything of the sort being feasible in South America," said Adelina, smiling.

"And yet this one is."

"How can it be so?"

"My information, reduced to as few words as possible, is as follows: Two or three years ago there was a meeting, here in the city of New York, of several revolutionist leaders. They represented various countries of South America, notably Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, Chili, and Bolivia. It is said that there were representatives of every country of South America at that meeting; whether it is true or not, I do not know. But the purport of the meeting was to organize a concerted movement, by which the malcontents of the various countries should be brought together, and financed in such a manner that they could act as one, and with but one object in view."

"And that object, you say, was the establishment of an empire?"

"It really amounts to the same thing," replied Nick, "although I don't think that the words 'empire,' or 'emperor,' or anything pertaining to royalty were used. The idea of still dealing in a republican spirit was still maintained, although you and I both know that there could be no more absolute monarchy anywhere in the world so far as one-man rule is concerned, than at present exists in every one of the South American republics, so-called."

"That is very true," she admitted.

"The scheme of this movement is to sweep over the country from the Isthmus to the straits, and to place the entire territory of South America under one dominant head, dividing the countries, as they at present exist, into states, and so creating one country and practically one government, which, according to the plans, is to be the greatest in the world, and which, ultimately, is intended to become the most powerful."

Adelina nodded her head, deeply interested.

"It is like many other things," pursued the detective, "entirely feasible, logically and technically, but apparently impossible from a practical standpoint. But if the dominant factors of the revolutionary element in those countries could be brought to the point of working together, there is no doubt that such a scheme might be carried out, or else there is no doubt at all that South America would presently be plunged into the bloodiest war that the world has ever witnessed."

"It is terrible to contemplate," said Adelina.

"Well, that is the condition that is said to exist," remarked the detective, after a pause. "I have spoken to you about it only because I thought that some mention of such a movement might have been made in one of your letters. I wish that you would think again, and try to remember if any such thing has been even suggested, by any sentence contained in one of the letters you have received from your home or from any of your South American friends."

"No; nothing of the kind has ever, even remotely, occurred to me."

"I was approached, more than two weeks ago, by a gentleman from one of the South American countries, but who hesitated a long time before he came to the actual purpose of his call," the detective continued reminiscently. "He seemed reluctant to explain to me all that he had in mind, and afterward admitted that his reluctance was due only to the fact that the scheme was so stupendous in its conception as to be entirely unbelievable, and the man had doubted if I would take him seriously."

"Who was he?" asked Adelina.

"He was a gentleman who was sent to me by the president of Peru, and he represented four presidents of other countries beside that one. Through their spy-systems, or because of some sort of betrayal on the part of the conspirators, those men had received knowledge of the movement that was on foot, and had thought it serious enough to demand attention. Their information was to the effect that this city was the headquarters of the conspirators; that every plan concerning it was made here; that the heads of the movement were quartered here, and living here, and that the organization of this monster rebellion against the present order of things was being carried on in a very quiet but effective way right here in the City of New York."

"That, I suppose, is why the man sought you."

"It is one reason; but there are several others. They sought me chiefly because there was no other apparent means by which they could get at the secrets of the movement, save through the channels I could supply. There would have been no use to appeal to the general government, for the reason that the government could not take cognizance of such an affair until some overt act was committed."

"I see."

"My name is more or less well known in the several countries concerned in this matter, and so they came to me."

"Well," asked Adelina, "what have you discovered?"

The detective smiled before he replied; then he said:

"Absolutely nothing, my dear. I am inclined to believe that the character and size of the movement has been very much overestimated. As a matter of fact, I have begun to doubt that such a movement exists at all; or if it does exist, I think it is local, and not general in its character. And yet, Adelina, the very feasibility of such a scheme appals me when I think of it, and I have considered it my duty to treat the matter seriously."

"I should suppose so; certainly."

The detective was silent after that, and Adelina was thoughtful, and so several moments passed in utter silence between them. It was broken presently by Patsy's wife, who said:

"I have been out, shopping, to-day, and when I found that I was late for luncheon, I went into the Holland House, on my way home, for some tea and toast. While I was seated at the table, a lady and gentleman, both known to me by sight, although there is no personal acquaintance between us, entered the room and seated themselves at a table opposite me. They were talking together rather animatedly, although, because of the distance, I could not hear so much as the sound of their voices. What I started to say, was this: If there is any conspiracy being hatched, of the kind you describe, in the country to which those two persons belong, you may rest assured that they are in it. I know who they are, and I know whereof I speak."

"All that sounds very interesting," said Nick. "Who were they, Adelina?"

"Don José Carerra and his wife Mercedes, of Lima, Peru. They are two of the greatest conspirators which that country has ever known. I have heard my father speak of them, often, in the past. They are people who are not satisfied with stirring up revolutions in their own country, but they are responsible for the last one that has happened in Bolivia; and I have heard my father say that when those two can't start a revolution in one place, they move to another one and try it."

"Well, Adelina, what do you suggest?"

"Why," she said, "I am not ready to suggest anything, until I have got finished with what I was saying."

"Very well, then."

"They have two daughters, who should be about my own age. Twins they are, and although I have never seen them, I have been told that they are so nearly alike that one might readily pass for the other."

"How does that interest us?"

"It is interesting only because I have heard that they are as busy fomenting conspiracies and revolutions, as their parents are; but I do not know as to that. I was only thinking that if the daughters are here, with their father and mother, I might make an excuse to call upon them."

"Good, Adelina! That is a splendid idea."

"Only I don't know that they *are* here."

"Then take it for granted."

"I could call and send my card to them. I could readily explain my reasons for doing so, because I have frequently heard my father talk about Don José, and I think I could get through the interview very pleasantly."

"There is no doubt of that, Adelina."

"But I doubt very much if I could get any information from the old fox, or his wife. They are past masters in the art of concealment. With the daughters, if they are here, it might be different."

"What are the daughters named?"

"Carmen and Emilia."

"You might take Patsy with you, when you make your call," suggested Nick.

"No," replied Adelina, "I can do better without him, in a case of this kind; and besides it would not be directly in accordance with South American customs to do so. But I will go there, and at once, if you think it would be wise to do so."

"I do think so; most certainly."

It was a few minutes past four when Nick Carter, having left Adelina to prepare for the call she was to make, went out of the house and turned southward, for no other purpose than to get in the open air during the afternoon of that very pleasant day.

He strolled slowly down Madison Avenue, and had turned to cross the square, when his attention was arrested by a group of persons, numbering five, who stood closely together at the northwest corner of Twenty-sixth Street and the avenue, seemingly engaged in a very earnest, whispered conversation.

Nick paused for a moment to watch them, but with no reason other than that such a proceeding was unusual, and while he stood there, one, and then another of the five, hurried away, followed by a third, and then a fourth; but, as these men departed, others approached and joined the group, and during the succeeding ten minutes the detective noticed, with considerable surprise, that although the group never numbered more than five persons, neither did it ever number less than four. Always, when some one detached himself from it, another seemed ready to step forward, or to appear upon the scene just in time to join it, and during the ten minutes stated, Nick counted twelve such persons who came from nowhere and departed in the same manner.

But he did not regard the scene seriously at all, although, when he had ceased to watch them because of further lack of interest, he strolled across the avenue and went past them, noticing that their conversation hushed as he did so.

But he continued on his way, and would not have paused had it not been that happening to look downward, he saw something lying in the gutter which instantly arrested his attention. Stepping forward quickly, he picked it up in his hand, exclaiming, as he did so: "Patsy's silver match-box! I wonder how it came here?"

CHAPTER V.

THREE MEN ON A BENCH.

There are certain intuitions, sometimes called premonitions, which come to us suddenly, and often without apparent cause; and just such a sense of disaster of some sort came upon Nick Carter, when he stooped to pick up the silver match-box which had fallen from Patsy's hand when the latter received the blow which hurled him insensible inside the hack; for Patsy had been about to relight his cigar at the time he was called, and had rushed across the street in that direction.

It was a box that had been given to Patsy by his wife soon after their marriage, and he treasured it very highly, not because of its intrinsic value, and notwithstanding the fact that it bore his initials in gems, but because it was a present from the one he loved best in all the world.

Nick Carter knew that Patsy would never have dropped that box from his hand inadvertently; likewise, he believed that it could not have been taken from Patsy's pocket, where he carried it, save by Patsy himself.

The detective argued that if the young assistant had been in the act of making use of the match-box when it was dropped, that he would have neglected no means to recover possession of it; and because of these facts, it had a mute story to tell by its presence there.

There was no doubt of its ownership.

Nick Carter had seen it too often to be deceived in that regard.

It was Patsy's without question, and the fact that it was found lying in the gutter was proof positive to the detective that something had happened to deprive his assistant of its possession—something which was beyond Patsy's control, and which prevented him from searching for it after it was lost.

He stood there several moments, regarding the box closely, slowly turning it in his fingers as he did so, and snapping it open and shut from time to time, pondering upon the matter, puzzled and troubled by the incident.

It was quite true that a deft pickpocket might have noticed it in Patsy's hand, and followed him to steal it, but on the other hand, Patsy was one whose pockets could not be easily rifled of their contents by any such expert, and certainly such a thing as that would not be likely to occur at a corner like that one, where there was no crowd about, to jostle a victim.

Again, it was not likely that the box had been there a very long time, since it had been lying with the initial side exposed, and the glistening gems which formed the monogram sparkled in the sunlight plainly enough to have attracted attention, had eyes been directed that way, as Nick's were.

The detective glanced toward the park, then crossed the street and approached one of the benches upon which three men were seated.

He had put the match-box into his pocket, and now he stepped in front of the three men, and said to them:

"Can any one of you tell me of any incident that has happened just across the street, in front of you, since you have been seated here—any particular incident that has attracted your attention?"

One of the men, who was plainly of the tramp order, looked up with a grin, and replied:

"Aw, say, boss, what yuh givin' us? Have yuh got a touch o' the willies?"

"I mean what I say," said Nick. "How long have you been seated here?"

"Oh, I guess I've been here a couple o' hours."

"Well, have you seen anything happen on the other side of the street since you have been here?"

"No; nothin' ain't happened."

"If any one of you three will try to remember and tell me just what has happened over there, it would be worth half a dollar to the man who could give me the information I seek," said Nick slowly; and the tramp straightened himself instantly.

"Now, you're talkin', boss. Somethin' did happen, only I didn't pay much attention to it."

The other two men had begun to show signs of interest by this time, but as neither of them made any remark, Nick again addressed the tramp.

"Tell me what you saw," he said. "Begin at the moment when you arrived here, and tell me everything that you have noticed across the street, there, since you came."

"Well, boss, there wasn't nobody there, when I came, so far as I kin remember. Once in a while a wagon would go by, and people, of course, were passing along, one way or the other; and then, by and by, a hack stopped over there, and stood there quite a while; and I guess somebody was sick, or wanted somebody, for the driver got down and stuck his head inside a minute, after which he rubbernecked around considerable; then he started across the street for that bench over there, where two men were settin', and he said somethin' to them, only I don't know what it was; but whatever it was, it made the two covies hump themselves, for they got up and started on a run, both of them, toward the hack."

"Well," said the detective, when the man paused.

"Well, that's all, mister."

"What do you mean by its being all?"

"I mean that the two men jumped inside the hack, and that the driver jumped on the box and drove away."

"Well, what happened after that?"

"Nothin' happened after that."

"Do you remember anything about the description of the two men who ran toward the hack?"

"Wot's that, boss?"

"Can you tell me how those two men looked?"

"Well, one of 'em, the chap who was ahead when they run that way, had on a brown suit of clothes, and a brown derby hat, and he didn't wear no whiskers, or mustache, and I should say that he wasn't quite as tall as you are."

Nick knew that Patsy had worn his brown suit and brown derby away from the house that morning, and, therefore, the tramp's description of the affair seemed to bear out the suspicions he had already formed regarding the circumstances.

True, there was no reason to be thought of why Patsy should have been attacked, or summarily dealt with, in such a public place, at that hour of the day; but the mute evidence of the match-box, and the manner in which it had been found by the detective, convinced him that something of the kind must have occurred, nevertheless.

"You say the two men ran toward the hack when they were summoned by the driver?" he asked the tramp.

"That's wot I said, boss."

Nick turned toward the other two who were seated on the bench, and asked:

"Did either of you see what this man has described?"

"We ain't givin' out no information when he gets the hull half-dollar," replied one of them.

"Oh, I'll pay for whatever information I get, if it is information worth using."

"Well, then, mister, I reckon that I saw more than Fuzzy did. That's what we call him—Fuzzy. He had a jag on, last night, and ain't any too particular observing. If I'm to get, say, a quarter, for what I'm to tell you now, I'll open up."

"All right," said Nick, humoring the man. "You're on. Go ahead."

"Well, I saw the two men settin' on that other bench, when they come to it. The feller in the brown suit got there foist, and the other one sidled up to him later on, just as if he was keeping tabs on the foist one."

"Are you sure of that?"

"No, I ain't sure of nothin'; it was only a impression I got. But that ain't all, mister."

"What more?"

"The two wasn't acquainted; you could see that with half an eye. They didn't have no talky-talk between 'em, and the brown one was mostly engaged in reading his paper, and watching the corner over there, where they seem to be holding some kind of a convention just now."

Again Nick Carter's eyes turned toward the corner in question, and he saw that the group which had attracted his attention in the first place was disintegrating now; for while the detective looked toward them, the last one walked away, and the convention, if such it were, as suggested by the hobo on the bench, was over.

"Go on with your story," said the detective.

"Well, what I seen was this: The hack-driver acted just like Fuzzy says he did. He rubbered inside the hack a minute, and then he turns and makes a beeline for the brown chap and t'other one on that bench, just as if he wanted help; but all the time we was nearer to him than they was. He shouted out something, just as Fuzzy says he did, and the two men on the bench jumps up and runs, Browny taking the lead and the other chap coming in a good second. And then, when they gets right to the open door of the hack, the feller behind chucks out his right arm, and mister Brown dives inter the hack, head foist, and the other feller jumps in on top of him. Then, mister driver slam-bangs the door, jumps onto his box, picks up the reins, and says 'giddap.'"

"Are you sure of what you are telling me?" asked Nick.

"Just as sure certain as I am sitting here facing you, and waiting for that quarter."

The detective produced a quarter and tossed it to the man, remarking as he did so:

"There's another one goes with it when you have finished your story."

"But there ain't no more to tell. I'd like to earn the extra quarter well enough, but that's all I know about it."

"Are you positive that the second man struck the one who was dressed in brown?"

"No, I ain't positive; but that's what I thought."

"And so it looked to you as if the whole thing was a prearranged plan that had been carried out?"

"That's the way it looked to me."

"Was the hack a public convenience?"

"It didn't have no number on it, if that's what you mean."

"Was the driver in livery?"

"I don't know whether he belonged to a livery or a private stable, but——"

"Did the driver wear a uniform of any kind?"

"Nope."

"How long ago did that happen?"

"Oh, it was an hour, sure. Maybe more."

"Which way did the hack go?"

"It turned up Broadway."

Nick brought forth the second quarter for the man, and a half-dollar for his first informant, and was turning away, when the third one of the three left the bench and joined him.

"I think, sir," he said, in a low tone, "that I can add something to the information you have received

if you care to hear it; and I am not suggesting it for gain."

The manner of the man, and the language he used, impressed Nick favorably, and so he replied:

"Walk through the square with me and tell me what you know. You won't regret it."

"I am not sure that what I can tell you is worth anything at all, sir, but I happened to be noticing that carriage, when it stopped on the other side of the street from where I was seated, and something familiar about the figure of the driver attracted my attention, so that I kept studying him. When, a little later, he ran across the street into the square and called to the two men as was described to you, I got a better view of his face, and I was sure then that I was not mistaken."

"You recognized him as some one you knew?" asked Nick.

"No, sir; but I recognized him as a person I had seen before, to-day."

"Ah, I understand you. It was in another part of the city?"

"To be frank with you, sir, I saw that same driver, with the same horses and hack, near the corner of Sixtieth Street, on Columbus Circle, between ten and eleven o'clock this morning."

"Well," said Nick, "what of that? How does that help me in the matter?"

The man hesitated, and coughed in a confused manner before he replied. Then tentatively, he said:

"You look like a gentleman, sir, and I believe you are one. If I could know just why you make these inquiries, I think perhaps I could supply you with some further information, although I am not sure that I have the right to do so."

Nick paused abruptly. They were half-way across Madison Square at the time, and near a vacant settee at the center of it.

"Sit down here a moment," said the detective, "and let us finish this conversation. It is evident to me that you have something on your mind which is interesting, and that you know more about the affair than you have told me."

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED CLUE.

While they were seating themselves upon the bench, Nick studied his man in that quick but penetrating way that was peculiarly his own, and he thought he discerned in him a person of unusual intelligence, whom misfortune had temporarily cast down.

The stranger had a clean-cut physiognomy. His eyes were clear and sincere in their expression, and his manner and language were those of one who had seen better days.

Whether or not the man was conscious of the detective's scrutiny is not important; he answered the last remark made by Nick as if there had been no hiatus, and said:

"No, sir; you are mistaken as to that. I know nothing more about the incidents to which you have referred than I have already told you; but I do know about other circumstances which have happened to-day, which possibly may bear some relation to this affair."

"Well?"

"I hesitate to speak plainly to you, sir, for the reason that I will be, in a measure, betraying a confidence that has been reposed in me. I don't like to do that. I never have made a practise of doing such things."

"If what you have to tell me bears any relation to the information I am seeking," said Nick, "please don't hesitate because of any idea that I may abuse your confidence."

"Very well, sir, I wish you would look at me."

"I have already done that quite thoroughly," replied Nick, smiling.

"I am a man who has been my own enemy. Once I had a fortune of my own, but I dissipated it foolishly, and from that time have lived as I might, following the races when I was flush; living from hand to mouth when I was broke. I have now graduated to that position in life which is explained by the word 'Adventurer.'"

"I understand."

"No, sir; pardon me, but you do not entirely understand. Men who become adventurers are a happy-go-lucky set so long as they are successful, but a failure or two renders them desperate, and the adventurous lives they have led have brought them to that pass and condition whereby they are content to take up with any cause that offers itself, no matter how desperate it may be, provided only that it presents a fair chance for ultimate success."

"Surely," said Nick.

"Such a chance came to me rather more than a week ago, sir. A man, with whom I had struck up a street acquaintance, suggested it to me. I will not now tell you exactly what it was, because that is not a necessary part of my communication. It is sufficient to say that in order to make myself personally known to the people who were to benefit me, I had to go through certain phases of conduct, during which it was understood that I should be closely observed—watched, in fact, for the purpose of discovering if I fulfilled all the requirements."

"This is interesting," said Nick, smiling. "It sounds like the first chapter of a novel."

"Believe me, I am telling you nothing but the entire truth."

"I believe you. Please go on."

"The last one of the conditions I was to fulfil [illegible] will appear exceedingly strange, when I describe it to you."

"Nevertheless, let me hear it."

"I was to approach the iron railing around the statue of Columbus, at Fifty-ninth Street and Eighth Avenue, this morning, at exactly twenty-five minutes after ten; I was to carry in my hand a piece of white chalk, with which I was to make my initials on that iron fence; I was then to wait a few moments before erasing the initials I had made, and was then to walk slowly down Eighth Avenue until I was accosted by some person who would speak to me."

"Well, well," said Nick, "this is decidedly interesting."

"It is not necessary that I should tell you more concerning what happened, or what was said to me, save only that I was instructed to be at a certain part of the city at a stated moment this afternoon. I visited that section of the city, but having thought deeply upon the matters I have described, I had determined not to make myself known—to have nothing further to do with it, in fact."

"Well, what does all this story you are telling me lead to?" asked Nick.

"To this one fact, sir; When, after making the chalk-marks on the fence, I strolled down Eighth Avenue, I was spoken to by a person who met me there; that person, who spoke to me, I took occasion to follow and to watch, and ultimately, near the Circle, he entered a closed hack. The hack, sir, was the same one we have been discussing."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite so."

"And the driver was the same?"

"Driver, horses, and hack were the same. I am positive of that."

Nick Carter was silent for a considerable time.

There were several coincidences in connection with this man's story which interested him deeply, the principal one being that he knew Patsy to have been in the neighborhood of Columbus Circle that morning, very nearly at the time this man mentioned as having been there himself.

Danny had told the detective that Patsy had ridden with him in the car to the point where it was to await the detective's arrival; that Patsy had become interested in something near at hand, and had finally left the automobile, giving Danny the instructions with which we are already familiar.

Of course, Nick Carter knew nothing about Patsy's observance of the chalk-mark episode, and did not even conjecture what it was that had called the young assistant from the tonneau of the car.

But putting two and two together invariably results in four; and the figure four in this case seemed to resolve itself into the almost positive suggestion that Patsy had observed the making of the chalk-marks on the fence by this man, who sat beside the detective now, and perhaps by others, and having had his curiosity aroused by the incidents, might have meddled with some matters that had alarmed the people about whom this stranger had been talking; the people who had directed him to make the chalk-mark in white.

"There were others who were directed to make such chalk-marks on that fence; others than you?" asked Nick presently.

"Yes, sir. I am not supposed to know about them, but I do know, because I watched."

"Tell me what you saw."

"Again I hesitate, sir, feeling that I am dealing with something that does not concern me, since I have elected to repudiate it; but I will tell you, nevertheless."

"Thank you."

"I went to the place—to Columbus Circle—more than an hour before the time I was told to make the signal in chalk. I took up a position from whence I could observe closely all that should happen immediately around the statue."

"Yes," said Nick.

"I saw many men, during that hour, who did as I had been told to do."

"With the chalk?"

"Yes."

"Tell me exactly what they did do."

"I saw them, one after another, and at different intervals, one, two, five, or ten minutes apart, approach the iron railing which surrounds the white pillar, and I saw each one that I have described make some sort of mark against the fence, and then erase it. The notable thing about it was that in no case did two men approach from exactly the same direction, and in no case did they arrive at the statue at the same time."

"It all seems to have been perfectly arranged for," said the detective. "How many men did you count, who approached the statue, and made their marks in that manner?"

"Fourteen, sir."

"And possibly that same sort of thing had been going on for a considerable time before you arrived there, and it might have been continued after you left the place."

"I don't think there is any doubt of that, sir. It may be going on now, for all we know, and it might have begun at daylight."

"Will you tell me your name?" asked Nick.

"My name is of no importance in this matter, sir, neither is there any reason why I should not divulge it. I have always been honest, no matter what else I may have done, or left undone. My name is John Durland." He paused a moment, and then, with a slight smile, added: "And yours?"

"My name is Carter," said the detective; "and, Mr. Durland, since you have been so frank with me, I will try to be equally so with you."

"Thank you, sir."

"I am the detective of that name, who is commonly known as Nick Carter."

"Ah, indeed; I have heard about you, Mr. Carter, and I am very glad to make your acquaintance; but since you have told me your name, it makes me wonder if what I have told you is of professional interest to you."

"I don't know whether it is or not," said Nick. "It may, or it may not be; I have not yet determined that. But if you are willing to be still more frank with me, Mr. Durland, I would appreciate it exceedingly if you would give me what further information you have in your possession."

Durland smiled, and accepted a cigar which the detective handed to him, and the light which was proffered after it.

"The trouble is that I have no further information to give, Mr. Carter," he said. "I have told you absolutely all I know about the matter. Being a floating derelict, as I have said, I was ripe for any sort of adventure, and when the matter of the chalk, as I described it, was suggested to me, I rather liked it. The fact that I have dropped it since then is due solely to my lack of purpose in life. I like mystery well enough, but this was not the sort of mystery that attracted me, and when it came to keeping the appointment that was made after I put the chalk-marks on the fence, I balked; that is all."

"You have no idea what it is all about?"

"None whatever."

"Tell me this; Did you, at any time, when you were near Columbus Circle this morning, see the man dressed in brown, about whom I have been making inquiries?"

"Yes, sir; I did."

"When did you see him?"

"I saw him a little while after I had made the chalk-marks on the fence, and had been accosted in the street, as I have described."

"Please tell me about it; tell me what you saw, and everything you saw."

"I first noticed him, Mr. Carter, coming down Eighth Avenue, and I saw a man step forward and meet him precisely as another man had met me, a little while before. I saw him receive an open envelope, in the same manner that I had received one."

The detective stared at his informant curiously, undecided whether to take all this as literally true or not; but the clear, straightforward look in Durland's eyes reassured him, and he said, after a pause:

"All this looks as if the man in brown had also been busy making chalk-marks."

"It does, sir; and I happen to know that he did busy himself in that respect."

"How so? How do you know that?"

"He interested me, and I watched him."

"Well?"

"I saw him return to the Circle, and stand for a time near the statue, and then, greatly to my astonishment, I observed him make other marks upon the fence; this time in red. I will confess that I was greatly interested at that, and I waited until he passed me, going down Eighth Avenue a second time. He was accosted as before, this time by a man who handed him a sealed envelope, and I was wondering what it could all mean, when I saw the same man who had delivered the open envelope to him a little while before, step forward quickly, and grasp this last one from the hand of the man in brown."

CHAPTER VII.

JACK DURLAND, ADVENTURER.

"Wait a moment," said the detective. "Are you positive that the man in brown was the same one whom you saw attacked over near the corner of Twenty-sixth Street and the avenue?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure there is no mistake?"

"Absolutely so."

"Go on, please, with your story. I find it exceedingly interesting."

"The man in brown whirled upon the other, seized him by the wrist, and tore the envelope from his grasp instantly."

"Well?"

"I was standing quite near to them. I saw something drop from the hand of the man in brown, and roll between the two; it was a piece of blue crayon."

"Blue, this time," said Nick, laughing. "There seems to be diversity of color, here."

"Yes, sir; but the blue chalk produced a strange effect."

"How so?"

"As it rolled between the two men—between the man in brown and the other, who had attempted to steal the envelope from him and had failed—the latter was plainly surprised and nonplused by the incident. He started back, and gave a salute in a military fashion, and seemed to apologize for what he had done. The man in brown returned the salute, and the two parted."

"Well, what happened then?"

"The man in brown remained where the other one had left him, then he stepped into a store, or a doorway near at hand, but presently emerged again, and returned to the same spot, evidently seeking the blue crayon he had dropped. It was not there, as I happen to know, because, having witnessed the effect of it, I had stepped forward in the interim and secured it myself. I have it now in my possession."

"What then?" asked Nick.

"Some particles of the blue chalk had remained upon the pavement. These had been ground under the feet of passing people, and had made a blue smudge upon the stone flagging at just that point. The man in brown stood for a moment contemplating it, and while he did so, was approached and accosted by a woman who was thickly veiled."

"Well, well," said Nick. "This story of yours seems to be developing a mystery."

"Yes, sir; I have wondered about it considerably."

"Go on, please."

"The two conversed together for a moment or more, and then moved down the avenue together. I followed them, but at no time near enough to hear what they said. I should judge, however, that they were not acquainted, and that the blue mark upon the pavement had sufficed for their introduction."

"And you are still sure about the man in brown?" asked Nick, more and more puzzled by the strange turn that affairs were taking.

"I am absolutely positive about him, sir."

"Please go on with your story."

"I should say that I was more than ever interested in the man in brown by now, and because of the triple reason that he had used the white chalk as I had been directed to do, then had made use of the red chalk, which I knew nothing about, and finally had exposed the blue chalk, which had, in its turn, produced such a remarkable effect upon one man and one woman; but even that was not all."

"Well?"

"When the man in brown parted with the woman, she appeared to me to have taken offense at something he had said, or at all events she did it with a gesture of haughtiness which is unmistakable in a woman of her type."

"Just what do you mean by 'her type'?"

"I mean that she was unmistakably a lady; that she was not a woman of the streets, who would accost a stranger without a well-defined and thoroughly proper reason for doing so."

"Go on."

"She left him, as I have said, in a manner which suggested offense on her part, or at least the desire to rid herself of her companion. He stood watching her for a moment, and then retraced his steps again to the statue, where he deliberately made marks in blue at the north, east, west, and south points of compass of the circular fence. He erased these marks as he made them, and afterward walked to the edge of the narrow stone platform which surrounds the place, and deliberately threw the chalk away."

"Well?" said Nick, again.

"I could not account for this. I was drawing nearer, and had determined to speak to the man, but I saw another, whom I had not noticed before, leap from a passing car, secure the blue chalk, approach the man in brown, and deliver it to him. They held a short conversation thereafter, which was brought to a close by the stranger leaping upon another passing car and riding away."

"What became of the man in brown?"

"He stayed where he was for a few moments, and then walked through Fifty-ninth Street to Fifth Avenue, down Fifth Avenue to Thirtieth Street——"

"You seem to have followed him?"

"I did, sir; I had determined to do so."

"And then——"

"A carriage was driving up to the entrance of the Holland House, as the man in brown approached it. A gentleman and a lady alighted from the carriage. The lady who got down was a perfect likeness of the one with whom the man in brown had talked on Eighth Avenue, although I recognized the fact that notwithstanding the likeness between them, she was not the same person."

"Well? What then?"

"I think, sir, that the man in brown was impressed by the same idea that I received, at first; that the two women were the same. But I think that he changed that opinion, as I did, a moment later, for he shrugged his shoulders and moved away, crossing Fifth Avenue and passing through Thirtieth Street, and then Madison Avenue, where he presently entered a house. I jotted down in my memory the number of the house, resolved to keep it in mind, and then I wandered down to that bench in the park where you found me."

"I am beginning to understand, now," said the detective.

"Then you are doing better than I can do myself, for I confess that I do not in the least understand it. I went to that bench in Madison Square because the envelope I had received, as described, told me to be at the corner of Twenty-sixth Street and Madison Avenue at three-fifteen. I passed the corner, although I did not stop. I saw a group of men, numbering five, at the corner, and at once guessed that I was expected to join them. I did not do so, however, but passed on, and came across the street to the bench where you found me. It was already occupied, but it supplied a good point of vantage, and from it I could observe that the group at the corner never numbered more than five, and never less than three while I sat there; and that the personnel of the group, so formed, constantly changed."

"How do you account for that?"

"I account for it by supposing that the men who were directed to go there received some further instructions, probably to go somewhere else, from the men they found there."

"Very likely."

"I have been interested in watching those proceedings all the afternoon, since I reached that bench, and were it not for your happening along as you did, I should have been there yet."

"Possibly," said Nick, "we would do well to return."

"It seems so to me, Mr. Carter."

They arose together, as with one impulse, and strolled back again to the point where Nick and Durland had met; but the bench was now unoccupied, the two tramps having left it to dispose of the money they had received, and the corner opposite was also deserted as it ever is.

"There is nothing to be gained here," said the detective.

"No, sir; I imagine not. Whatever it was that brought those men here, and no matter how many of them were to come, it is evident that the last one has arrived and departed. I fear we are too late to obtain any information in this quarter."

"Tell me more about the man in brown," said Nick.

"What more, sir?"

"When he came into the square, did you recognize him as the same one you had seen before?"

"Most certainly."

"Did that fact interest you?"

"Assuredly."

"You had already determined, in your own mind, that he was one of the parties interested in the affair with which you were supposed to be engaged, I take it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you still of that opinion?"

"I don't know whether I am or not. There have been times, since I have conversed with you, when I felt assured of it, and also that *you* are mixed up with it, somehow. But since you have told me who you are——"

"You have changed your mind, have you?"

"Yes; I think I have."

"It would seem," said Nick, "as if the man in brown were deliberately abducted from that spot over there for some reason or other which we cannot now determine."

"That is about the way I have figured it out, sir."

"Mr. Durland, the man in brown whom you have described to me, and whose actions you so fortunately watched, is one of my assistants. His name is Patrick Garvan. Now, it is due to you that I should explain to you exactly my interest in this matter, in order that I may secure your help and assistance to as great an extent as possible, for I foresee that if it is not too late, and if your opportunity as afforded by the chalk is not already lost, you may be invaluable to me."

"Very well, Mr. Carter. As I said before, I am ripe for anything."

"To begin with," said Nick, "in passing along the street over there, I picked up this silver match-box, which belongs to Mr. Garvan. He treasures it very highly. He is so particular about it that, having found it and recognized it as his, and knowing, as I do, that he would not readily part with it, I was convinced on the instant that he was deprived of its possession in some unusual manner. Just how it was I could not determine, for I had no means of doing so; for when you told me about the assault upon him, I thought I could see through the circumstance quite plainly."

"Tell me how you considered it, Mr. Carter."

"No; I will tell you instead how I consider it now in the light of all you have told me."

"Yes."

"Patsy, which is a familiar name by which I call my assistant, was waiting for me in an automobile near the park entrance at Columbus Circle, at the time when you and others were making chalk-marks on the fence. He must have noticed those proceedings, and have been interested by them. He must have determined to investigate, and in doing so the incidents you have described to me were brought about. Now, it is evident to me that the white, the red, and the blue chalk-marks each held its own meaning, and that when he displayed the blue crayon he somehow betrayed himself to others who were watching as not being what he appeared to be. For that reason, he got himself disliked, to make use of a common phrase, and, therefore, when presently he left Columbus Circle and passed through Fifty-ninth Street and down Fifth Avenue, as you have described, others followed him as well as you. They must have tracked him to his home, for that address which you took down so carefully is my house, and he lives there with me. Somewhat later a message written on blue paper was left at my door for him. I do not know what the message contained, but after reading it he went out of the house. When I came out I had no idea where he had gone or that anything had happened to him. I was not searching for him, or attempting to follow him, because I had no reason for doing so, and no method by which it could have been done had I possessed one. The discovery of the match-box was the first indication I received that anything had happened to him. The rest you know. Now, sir, what I would like to have you do is this: I would like to have you proceed with that chalk-mark business, if we can figure out a way for you to do it, in order that we may both determine what it leads to."

"You may command me, Mr. Carter. I will repeat for the third time: Jack Durland is ripe for anything."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN FOR THE PLACE.

The reader has already assumed that Nick Carter had not failed to associate this mystery of the colored chalks with the matter we have heard him discuss with Patsy's wife, Adelina.

Of course there was no proof that the idea was a correct one, and yet the conditions and circumstances seemed to fit together so well and so perfectly as to leave almost no doubt in the mind of the detective that Patsy had unwittingly stumbled upon the very thing which he would himself have been searching for by this time; and that he had, also, through his meeting with Durland, met with the same lucky circumstance.

If the conspiracy were organized as it had been outlined to him, and if representatives of the South American revolutionists were in the City of New York, plotting and planning for the ultimate overthrow of the republics of that portion of the world, it seemed more than likely to Nick Carter that they would go about the organization of their affairs as secretly as possible, and might resort to some such means as that described by Durland in accomplishing their ends.

The enlistment of a great body of adventurous men would be a prime factor in the beginning of their

actual proceedings, and just such characters as this Jack Durland seemed to be would form the most available timber from which the revolutionists would draw their human supplies.

But it seemed almost too late to make good use of Durland's instrumentality in the affair, since he had failed to keep the appointment made through the medium of the mark of the white chalk. He had not reported himself at the corner, although he had passed it in full view of the others who were sent there, and possibly, therefore, in view of one or more of them who had sent him.

If it were not too late, if Durland could by some means still attract the attention of those who had sought him, and if he might yet join with the intriguers and so learn something of their plans, it would not only develop into a certainty the mystery concerning Patsy's disappearance, but it would go a long way toward aiding Nick Carter in the undertaking he had adopted on behalf of the emissaries of the South American governments, as they at present existed.

Time had flown during this lengthy interval, wherein the detective had been engaged first in conversation with the two tramps and then in the interview with Durland, as we have described it.

It was now approaching five o'clock in the afternoon, and since Nick Carter and Durland returned to the bench where the detective had first discovered the adventurer, there had been no sign at or near the opposite corner of street and avenue of the men of the white chalk, as Nick Carter chose mentally to refer to them.

He felt that if he had read the signs correctly; if he had outlined the possible predicament in which Patsy was involved truthfully, no time should be lost in following up the small clue he had obtained, and in liberating Patsy from any difficulty in which he might have become involved.

And yet there was no appreciable way in which to turn; every clue the detective possessed, although tangible enough in itself, was utterly intangible so far as immediate results were concerned—and an immediate result was what Nick Carter most desired.

He bethought him, then, of the errand upon which he had sent Adelina, and also of Durland's description of the two women he had seen—the one whom Patsy had met on Eighth Avenue and the other one who had left the carriage at the entrance to the Holland House.

He asked himself if it were not possible that these were the sisters to whom Adelina had referred, the daughters of José Carerra, master conspirator of them all, revolutionist, and all that goes with the word in Latin-America.

It seemed to him more than likely that if his theories were at all logical, Adelina would be the one who would discover the real clue to be used in the case; and with this idea in mind, he turned abruptly to Durland for some further questioning.

"You have not told me, Mr. Durland, just how you were approached regarding this matter, in the first place."

"I don't know that it would be correct to say that I had been approached at all," replied Durland, smiling.

"How was the subject first brought to your attention?"

"In a manner that might be described as purely accidental, sir, although I have since thought that it was not so."

"There can be no doubt about that; nothing of the kind is ever accidental, Mr. Durland. You may be assured that before you were approached on the subject, before you were asked to go to Columbus Circle and make the chalk-marks, your worth had been thoroughly estimated by the people who desired to use you."

"Oh, yes, I feel assured of that."

"When was the first intimation of this affair made to you?"

"In a down-town barroom some time ago."

"How was it made?"

"It was suggested to me by a person who had invited me to drink with him."

"How was the suggestion made?"

Durland was silent for a moment, then he replied:

"As I recall the circumstance, the man first asked me if I had ever had military experience. I replied in the negative, whereupon he wished to know if I thought such a life would hold any attractions for me. I don't remember just what reply I made to that, but our conversation gradually drifted from one section of the globe to another, until presently it became localized in South America."

"Yes," said Nick. "I understand. He was leading up to that."

"Very likely."

"What then, Mr. Durland?"

"I remember that the man—I have no idea what his name was, and if he told it to me I have forgotten it—made the statement that he had undergone considerable experience in various South American countries, and he suggested, or asserted, that it was the best place in all the world for an adventurous man to go to. He spoke of several of the countries as glibly as if he were thoroughly familiar with them, their characteristics, and their people, and suggested that fortunes might be made easily enough in more ways than one if a man were only familiar with the language and was not a coward in spirit or physique."

"Yes?"

"I grasped at the idea; it appealed to me. I told him that I would not hesitate to go to any portion of the globe whatever, if only it held out promises of excitement, adventure, and gain."

"Well?"

"We parted after mutual expressions of regard, but I am sure that we did not exchange names; it is needless to say that we had no cards."

Nick smiled and Durland continued:

"Subsequently, I encountered the man again in the

vicinity of Union Square, and once more he invited me to drink with him. We entered a resort at the corner of University Place, where a luncheon is served to the customers, and while we ate and drank we talked."

"On the same subject?"

"Yes, sir; on the same subject."

"Then it is not necessary to repeat the particulars of it."

"No; that is unnecessary. The subject-matter of our talk was relatively the same as before; but it ended on that occasion with a suggestion from him which has brought about this present conversation."

"Now please tell me exactly what he said."

"I remember that when he left the table he turned to me and placed one of his hands on my shoulder; then he said:

"'If you are of the same mind, and in the same mood, on the twenty-fourth of June, purchase a piece of white chalk during the morning of that day, and do with it as I shall now suggest to you.'

"Then it was, Mr. Carter, that he gave me the specific directions which I followed to-day; the directions which led me to go to Columbus Circle prepared to carry out his instructions. You know the rest as well as I do."

"Was no more said on the subject between you at that time?" asked Nick.

"By me there was; by him there was nothing definite. I remember that I asked him many questions, all of which he either smilingly refused to answer, or about which he professed entire ignorance. I asked him where he got his information, and what would come of it if I did as he suggested, and received no satisfaction whatever."

"What was your impression at the time?"

"I regarded it all as a hoax; or as a joke. I think I determined that the man was attempting only to trade upon my credulity; and yet, if that were so, I could not understand why he should apparently have sought me, and why he should spend his money in purchasing food and drink."

"And then?" asked Nick.

"That is all."

"All?"

"Yes."

"Have you never seen the man since that time?"

"No."

"Would you know him if you should see him again?"

"Most certainly."

"Did he impress you on either of the occasions when you met him as wearing any sort of disguise? I mean by this, was he other than quite natural in his appearance, demeanor, conduct, voice, and gesture?"

"I saw nothing about him to suggest such an idea, Mr. Carter."

"Durland, you have just asserted positively that if you should see this man again you would recognize him."

"Yes."

"Now, as a detective who regards that sort of qualification—the ability of recognizing a person a second time—from a scientific viewpoint, I want to know why you so thoroughly believe that you would recognize him? I ask you this because I wish to understand what feature, if any, or what expression, or mannerism, you depend upon as a basis for such an ability on your part."

"I understand," replied Durland, smiling. "There are two things about a man which I always notice with my eyes; two things about a man which I take note of with my ears, and one thing about a man which is derived from another sense, and which rarely fails me; you will laugh when I tell it to you."

"You may describe all of them to me, if you please," said Nick.

"I look at the expression of the man's eyes and at his manner of using them, and I notice particularly his teeth. I listen carefully to a man's speaking voice, with its several intonations and cadences, and I listen, also, for the sound of his footfalls when he walks, getting the time and rhythm of them thoroughly in my head. I am also as keen of scent as a hound on the trail, and about every person who lives there is an unmistakable individual odor which I have never yet failed to recognize a second time."

"It is quite remarkable," said Nick, smiling. "You are an observant person, Mr. Durland."

"I have found it exceedingly useful."

"So you think you would know this man if you came in contact with him a second time, even should he be disguised?"

"I do."

"Durland, do you know where the Holland House is located in this city?"

"I do, sir; I lived there six months once; but I was better fixed then than I am now."

"Would you be willing to accept sufficient funds from me to dress yourself up fairly well, to supply yourself with some hand-baggage and other necessaries, and to go for a few days to stop at the Holland House, at my expense?"

"I can see no objections to that, Mr. Carter."

"Would you consider yourself in my employ during that time, and faithfully report to me everything which might be of interest?"

"I would."

"Even if it involved this matter of the chalk-marks and the men who are associated with them?"

"Certainly."

"You would need no assistance from me in fitting yourself out for this duty, would you?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, listen to me now. I am about to entrust you with one hundred dollars. With that hundred dollars I wish you to provide yourself with a suit of clothes and everything that goes with it to render you entirely respectable in appearance and otherwise. I wish you to go to the Holland House and register

there, securing a room which you will retain until further orders; I wish you while there to pay particular attention to a certain Peruvian and his wife, named respectively José and Mercedes Carerra, and to their daughters Carmen and Emilia. I wish to know whatever you can find out about them, for I have an idea that if there is a conspiracy afoot of the kind suggested by the chalk-marks, Don José Carerra will know something concerning it. Do you, by any chance, speak Spanish?"

"I do. That was one of the reasons why the stranger was particularly interested in me."

"Better and better. It is needless to add to my list of instructions that while you are at the Holland House as a guest, you will observe closely all persons who call upon Carerra, with the idea that the man who suggested the chalk-marks to you may be among them."

"I understand, Mr. Carter."

"Then here is your hundred dollars. Take it and go, and do as I have directed. It may impress you as unusual that I should trust a stranger as far as I appear to trust you, Mr. Durland, but I am a close reader of character, and until you have proved otherwise, I shall believe that I have made no mistake."

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT ADELINA DISCOVERED.

Although Nick Carter had proceeded, during the questioning of Durland, as if he were certain that Patsy had mysteriously disappeared, he was by no means sure of it. There was always the chance that the young detective might have dropped his match-box without being conscious of the fact, and there were many reasons why it was more tenable to suppose that the conjectures about him were without real foundation than that he had gotten into serious trouble.

Only for the story of the three men, and particularly Durland's part of it, to the effect that Patsy had been attacked in the open door of the hack, Nick would have been inclined to dismiss that part of the subject as of insufficient importance to claim his attention; but as it was, and taken in conjunction with the interest he already felt in some stupendous conspiracy that was afoot, he believed that chance had brought into his way the explanation of the remarkable case that had been given him by the emissaries of the South American republics.

When he left Durland he returned at once to his own home, knowing that Adelina had had sufficient time in which to render her call at the Holland House, and believing that he would find that she had returned.

In this he was not mistaken. Adelina was there, having just entered the house before he did, and she followed him into the library, whither he led the way.

"Well," he said, turning to face her as soon as the door was closed. "Did you make the call, Adelina?"

"I did."

"Upon the two young ladies?"

"Yes."

"I have picked up some information concerning them since I went out—enough to make me think that your ideas about them were doubtless correct."

"I think there can be no doubt of it," replied Adelina.

It must be remembered that Adelina as yet had no knowledge of what had befallen Patsy, and Nick paused for a moment while he considered whether it would be wise to tell her of the information he had in his possession.

Second thought determined him not to do so at the present moment.

"Tell me what was said, and what you did, while you were there," he said to her. "Tell me of the conversation you had with the members of that family, which I am to suppose is concerned with the case I have in hand."

Adelina shrugged her shoulders, after the manner of her countrymen, and smiled brightly, as she replied:

"There is no possibility of discovering anything from what those people do and say. They are like so many sphinxes; and Don José, the father, is the master sphinx of all."

"Well?" said Nick.

"I had no difficulty in obtaining the information that the daughters were at the hotel with Don José and his wife. I sent my card to Carmen, but I took the precaution to make use of one of the cards that were from a plate of mine made before I married Patsy. My name must have been recognized instantly, for presently a message came that I was to go up. The father, mother, and daughters occupy a suite of rooms fit for royalty, and I must say that I was received most graciously. As an excuse for my call I told them that I had noticed their names and remembered Don José from hearing my father speak of him frequently. I said that I had always wanted to know the young ladies, and considered this a fine opportunity to do so, because they were doubtless strangers in the city, and I would be glad to tender them any courtesies in my power."

"Excellent!" said the detective. "Go on!"

"That is the difficult part of it," replied Adelina, "because there is nothing to go on about. They received me in exactly the same spirit in which I made

the call. They appeared deeply grateful that I had taken the trouble to go to them; announced that they were more or less well acquainted in the city, but were none the less glad to make my acquaintance. I managed to direct the conversation to South American politics, but at no time during my visit there could I detect anything that was said or done which would lead one to suppose that the Carerras are here for any other reason than appears on the surface. But, Nick," and she bent nearer to him as she continued, "it is because of the very appearance of frankness, and the suggestion of openness about them, that I feel the more assured that those people are at the head and front of the affair you have mentioned."

"Wait a moment," said the detective. "I gather from what you have said, Adelina, that no words were used during your call there which would indicate that any one of the party was engaged in any sort of conspiracy at all."

"That is correct," she said, smiling.

"And also that you saw no action, or deed, on the part of any of the four which would lead to such a supposition."

"I did not."

"Then I must ask you a question or two based upon something which I have learned since we parted."

"Very well."

"Was any message brought to that suite of rooms while you were present there?"

"No; I don't think so. If there was I do not know about it."

"Did you particularly notice the character and contents of the room?"

"Yes," she replied. "I always do that since I have been a member of this family of detectives." And she smiled brightly at him.

"Was there a desk in the room?"

"Yes; and a very pretty one, indeed. At least I thought so."

"Did you happen to notice the stationery upon that desk?"

"Yes," she replied, in some surprise.

"What color was it?"

"There were three colors. I think it was that which made me take particular notice of it. On the right side of the desk there was a compartment filled with paper and envelopes that were almost sky-blue. Beneath that one was another which contained merely ordinary stationery of white; but on the other side of the desk there were paper and envelopes so very pink in hue as to be almost red."

"Good!" said Nick. "Excellent! We are getting at it now. You have just said that no message was brought to that room while you were there, so let me ask you if one was sent from it?"

"No; there were no messages of any kind that came or went from the place while I was there. I am sure that I do not know what you mean by those questions."

"It isn't necessary that you should, my dear. You have just now stated that in making the call upon them, you gave your maiden name."

"Yes; I did."

"Let me ask you if, while you were there, you informed them of your married name?"

"Certainly I did; I also gave them my address, and the young ladies are to return my call upon them."

Nick left the chair against which he had been leaning.

"I don't think it is likely that they will call upon you, Adelina; and yet they may do so," he said. "While it may seem to you that you have accomplished nothing in making the call you did upon the Carerras, yet you have accomplished much, and you have done so only because you took notice of the blue, the red, and the white stationery on the desk in that room. It is that which convinces me that the Carerras are the people I seek. And now, Adelina, I wonder if, among the articles there, scattered about or otherwise, you noticed such a thing as a piece of crayon, or chalk?"

Patsy's wife burst out laughing, but at the same time her face showed an expression of astonishment; and she exclaimed:

"You are sometimes uncanny in the way you get at mysterious knowledge. Now, who in the world would have supposed that you could guess that there were loose bits of crayon, or chalk, whichever you please to call it, lying about a sumptuously furnished parlor in the finest suite of rooms in the Holland House?"

"I guessed it," said Nick; "that is, if you did see such things there."

"I did see such things there, and I remarked upon it. But before I tell you about it, I wish you would tell me how in the world you guessed it."

"No," said Nick. "We will not take the time to do that. Tell me what was said about the crayon."

"Why, when I entered the room, there was a box containing red, white, and blue sticks of it, shaped like those that are used by children in school; the box was on a table at one side of the room, and was open. The strangeness of the appearance of such a thing in

such a place interested me because of its incongruity, and I crossed toward it at once, managing to do so without the attempt on my part seeming forced; and while I talked with them I picked up one of the pieces of crayon; but I put it back in the box without comment and crossed to a chair that had been assigned to me. Carmen Carerra closed the box at once, and came and seated herself beside me, and I said:

"'Are you studying art with colored crayons?' and she replied:

"'Yes,' and at once changed the subject."

"You have discovered all I wished to know regarding that point," said the detective, "and I am very glad that I sent you there. I think, this evening, that I will call upon the Carerras myself."

"Where is Patsy?" asked Adelina; and Nick, who had started to leave the room, turned toward her.

"Adelina," he said, "I was not going to tell you about it just yet, for I did not think it necessary. But I have learned this afternoon that Patsy ran afoul of those conspirators to-day in some manner, and that they have turned upon him. Patsy has disappeared, and I think, my dear, that he is now being held a prisoner somewhere by order of that same family of Carerras upon whom you called this afternoon."

"What?" exclaimed Adelina, starting to her feet.

"I do not think he is in any danger, Adelina, and you must rest assured that I shall lose no time in finding out what has become of him," replied the detective. "But that he is in the power of the Carerras I am certain. What reason they may have had for attacking him, or what disposition they propose to make of him, I do not know any more than you do."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE POWER OF A WOMAN.

But Nick Carter did not go to the Holland House that night.

The affair of the supposed conspiracy took on a new aspect from the moment he set foot out of doors after his dinner that evening.

Before his departure he had some further conversation with Adelina, and with the result that when he left her, she remained for a long time alone in the library thinking deeply upon what she would do to assist in the search for her husband; for, like Nick Carter, she had no doubt that Patsy, having learned too much for his own good regarding the plottings of the conspirators, had somehow fallen into their power; and she knew only too well the people of the South American countries who hold political affiliations among the highest of their duties; and whether they be rebels against their government or not, they invariably regard themselves as patriots.

If Patsy stood in the way of the accomplishment of the designs of these people, they would not hesitate to put him out of it by any summary means that happened to be most available.

But of Adelina's conduct after she received the information which Nick gave her, more will appear later; we have, for the present, only to do with the detective's experiences that night.

It was only a short walk from his house to the hotel he sought, and the distance might be covered in a few moments.

As he left his front steps and turned in the direction he desired to go, he saw several men apparently engaged in conversation, standing near the curb in front of the house adjoining his own. One man was seated under the steering-wheel of an automobile, which had been drawn up against the curb, and the others were grouped around him, while they all seemed to be discussing animatedly some topic which deeply interested them.

Nick gave them only a cursory glance, for his mind was intent upon the purpose of his errand, and he scarcely noticed them more than to observe their presence and their apparent occupation.

The course he took required that he should pass them, and as he started to do so, he paid no attention to the fact that the compactness of the group suddenly ceased; that the men spread out, and if Nick had been asked to state what they were doing, which, as a matter of fact, he did not consider at the time, he would have supposed that the group was breaking up, and that the men were merely taking leave of the one who occupied the front seat of the automobile.

It was one of the moments of inadvertence on the part of the detective; one of the times when a critic might have said that he was careless; but, on the other hand, it must be remembered that there was no thought in his mind, even remotely, of any attack upon himself or against his own person.

In stepping forward, as the group disintegrated, he had to pass between two of the men on one side of him and the remaining members of the group at the other side.

He did so without turning his head, and with a result that was decidedly disastrous to his plans for that evening.

No sooner had he stepped within reach of them than one of the men swung an implement that he had held concealed beneath his coat. It struck Nick Carter fairly against the back of his head, just beneath his hat-brim, and as he pitched forward, propelled by the force of the stunning blow, a second one was delivered in the same manner by a man on the other side of him, and he fell to his knees and would have gone prostrate on the pavement had not a third man grasped him and held him.

As it was, while not entirely unconscious, Nick was so dazed and stunned by the result of the attack, that for a moment he was helpless in the hands of the several men who had apparently been waiting for him.

They acted as if their plans had been carefully studied and prearranged, and no sooner had the detective fallen forward than he was seized and lifted in the arms of the men who had captured him, borne to the automobile, and deposited inside the tonneau, into which the several men crowded after him, some of them holding him down prone upon the bottom of the car, while the others bound him firmly with ropes they had brought for the purpose.

At the same time the man under the wheel started the machine forward and sped away along the avenue to the northward, being soon lost to view from the vicinity of Nick Carter's house.

Luck had filled a large place in the actions of these men who attacked Nick Carter, for it had so happened that at the time of the assault no person, not even a policeman, was near enough to see and to understand what was taking place.

The detective did not entirely lose consciousness. He was dimly aware of what had happened to him, although in no condition to resent it physically, and of no other mind in the matter save that he had fallen into the hands of some of his many enemies.

At the moment he did not connect them with the conspiracy that was afoot, or with the mystery that surrounded Patsy, but he was speedily to discover that these men against whom he had pitted himself in accepting the case against the South American revolutionists, were not to be treated with the same sort of contempt that one feels for ordinary criminals.

As the machine sped northward, Nick Carter's understanding of his surroundings gradually returned to him, and, although he was so firmly bound that he could not move, his resourcefulness of mind gradually returned.

Thus it was, that by the time the car came to a stop, after a drive which lasted approximately thirty minutes, as nearly as Nick could estimate it, he was in full possession of his mental faculties, if not of his muscular forces.

But the men had taken another precaution during that ride by binding Nick's eyes firmly with a bandage, so that when presently he was lifted from the car, and borne across a pavement and up a flight of several stone steps, finally passing through a doorway into a house, he had no idea what the destination might be at which they had arrived.

He remembered that the automobile had been headed north while it stood against the curb nearly in front of his own house, but immediately after the two blows he received his mind had been too dazed to remember what direction the machine had taken after it was started.

He heard the door close behind them, and then he knew that he was carried through a hallway into a room at the rear of the building, and he was conscious of the fact that the men who carried him trod upon a soft and yielding carpet, or rug, while the atmosphere around him suggested to his mind the interior of a well furnished, and possibly sumptuously appointed, house.

Not one of his captors uttered a word during all this time. They proceeded in utter silence, as if every move they made had been carefully thought out beforehand; and presently Nick was deposited upon an upholstered chair, and while he waited for some futher act on the part of the men who had taken him there, he was conscious only of their retreating footfalls. Then a door near him closed softly, and he realized that he was alone, bound, blindfolded, and helpless.

He wondered at the strange proceedings. He could move his feet about him on the carpet, and that action, together with the feeling of the chair upon which he was seated, convinced him that he had not been mistaken in his thought that he was in a well appointed house, doubtless situated somewhere in the northern part of the city.

Five minutes or more passed in this manner, and he was beginning to wonder what would happen next, or if he had been left there in that condition indefinitely, when he became conscious of the presence of a person near him.

His first idea of it came with a sound which suggested the rustle of a woman's gown, and notwithstanding his condition, he started, wondering if, indeed, a woman was near him, and silently regarding him.

Presently he became assured of it, for he felt the touch of soft and delicate fingers upon his head, as a hand was gently passed across his forehead, around to where the blows had struck him; and then a soft and melodious voice inquired, in a tone that was almost a whisper:

"Does your head hurt very badly?"

The start of surprise which came to Nick Carter at hearing this question, delivered in the melodious feminine voice, effectually dispelled, for the moment, the pains in his head, which were the result of the blows he had received; but he replied:

"My head aches somewhat, quite naturally; I think I would be glad if you would remove the bandage from my eyes."

Without replying in words, the woman's fingers at once busied themselves with the knot, which at first resisted her efforts, so securely had it been tied; but presently the bandage fell away from his eyes, and he stared about him in amazement, seeing nothing of her who had restored his sight to him, but taking in the character of the room in which he was a prisoner with one comprehensive glance.

The owner of that mansion, for such he instantly decided the house to be, might have been a millionaire, if the character of the furnishings were to be considered. The woman who had removed the bandage from his eyes remained behind him, however, out of view.

He would have turned his head to discover her had she not at that instant passed around the chair and stood squarely in front of him, looking down upon him with brilliant and glowing eyes, that now seemed to be filled with pity for his condition.

With one guess Nick Carter leaped at a conclusion; it was that he was in the presence of one of the Carerra sisters, though which one it was, Carmen or Emilia, he had no means of determining.

CHAPTER XI.

A POSSIBLE EMPRESS.

Carmen Carerra, for she it was, had addressed the detective in English, but because of a whim which suddenly came to him, he chose to speak to her in the Spanish language, knowing that it was her native tongue, and having no doubt that she would prefer to use it.

"Señorita," he said, "will you be good enough to tell me why I am here?"

For a moment after he asked the question she regarded him in silence; then she said, and she spoke slowly:

"I am very glad that you have asked that question, señor, because it saves me unnecessary preamble in what I have to say to you. You are here because it is necessary that your activities against the people whom I now represent must cease."

"I am not aware that I have lately indulged in any activities, as you call them, against any set of people," replied the detective, smiling.

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"We need not beat about the bush," she told him. "That would be folly on both sides."

"I quite agree with you, señorita."

"Very well, then. You are Nick Carter, a detective. Lately you were approached by a man who told you that he represented the governments of several South American countries, and that he had been sent here to engage your services in a matter which related to a supposed conspiracy, designed to upset those existing governments, and eventually to bring about the greatest and most far-reaching revolution of the century, or of any other century. You follow me, señor?"

"Perfectly."

"I am correct in my statement?"

"I may as well admit that you are. But as yet——"

"Pardon me. You were about to say that as yet you have done nothing in that matter, and would have suggested that in bringing you here, as we have done, we have anticipated what may prove to be unnecessary incidents."

"Precisely. I see you are a mind-reader—as well as other things."

"You would have told the semblance of an untruth in the first part of that statement, Señor Carter, for already one of your assistants has taken an active part, indeed, in our affairs. Señor Garvan has made himself obnoxious to our interests. His wife, formerly of South America herself, has also done so. Only a few hours ago she called upon my family, at a hotel in the city, and her purpose in making that call was to—but why need I particularize? You know what the purpose of that visit was."

"Yes. And now I am wondering how *you* know it, señorita."

"We are in position where it is imperative that we should know things. It is a necessary part of the conditions by which we are surrounded."

"Indeed," said Nick.

"Before she made that call, her husband had already busied himself with our affairs. Having done so, it was necessary that he should take the consequences. We were already aware of the fact that you had been approached by those who are inimical to us. We could not permit things to go on as they had started. The man you call Patsy came upon some information by accident; but he chose to meddle with what did not concern him. He was warned, but the warning only whetted his appetite for mysteries. Therefore, he was put where he could do no more harm. You understand?"

"I seem to catch the drift of your statements; yes."

"Mr. Carter, we are prepared to make a bargain with you," she said, after a short pause, reverting to English again.

"Yes?" he replied to her.

"You are not personally interested in the affairs of South America, are you?"

"No."

"What those countries down there do, or choose not to do, is no concern of yours, is it?"

"In one sense—no."

"Then why not leave them alone?"

"I have not done otherwise, as yet."

"But you were already beginning to do otherwise, were you not?"

"How so?"

"Can you assure me that when you left your own home to-night, you were not bound upon an errand which had for its object the discovery of the originators of a so-called revolutionary conspiracy in South America?"

"No."

"Can you deny that you have been retained by a representative of South American countries to perform certain services for them?"

"No."

"Look at me, Mr. Carter."

"On my word, señorita, I have done nothing else since you stood before me."

"Do I impress you as one who would enter idly upon an undertaking as stupendous as the conspiracy you have been asked to put an end to?"

"You impress me as a determined young woman, if that is what you mean. I have no doubt that once having set your mind upon the accomplishment of a certain object, you do not consider trifles in carrying it out."

"You may be well assured of that, sir."

"Well?"

"I told you a moment ago that we were prepared to make a bargain with you."

"Yes."

"I can state it in one sentence."

"I am ready to hear it."

"If you will take oath to me, on your word of honor, that you will have nothing further to do with the conspiracy which now interests you; that you will not take any part, active or passive, during the next two years, with anything that concerns, even remotely, the South American governments, or any one of them, you shall be set at liberty at once, and if you will make the same promise in the name of your several assistants, Patrick Garvan shall go free with you."

"And if I should refuse to do so?"

"If you refuse, you must abide by the consequences."

"What would those consequences be, señorita?"

"I do not know; only I can assure you that no man shall stand in the way of the accomplishment of our purposes."

"Señorita, let me ask you a question in return?"

"Well, sir?"

"Suppose that *you* had approached me, in the beginning, instead of the person who did so; suppose that *you* had engaged my services, to do something for *you* in the line of what you are now attempting to accomplish; suppose that I had agreed to do it, to the best of my ability; what sort of an opinion would you have of me if, at the first appearance of danger, or at the first obstacle that presented itself, I should repudiate my promises to you, merely because a pretty woman asked me to do so?"

"I think you beg the question, sir."

"No, I do not. If I should place myself in such a position as that one, what would you then think of me?"

"I confess, sir, that my opinion of you would not be flattering."

"Certainly not. Now, tell me truthfully, please, if I should accept the bargain you seek to make with me, if I should make the promises you ask, and consent to do what *you* want me to do, what would your opinion of me be in *that* case?"

"Really, sir——"

"Answer me, please."

"It is not a fair question."

"It *is* a fair question. Would your opinion of me be any better because I had stultified myself to gratify

you, than it would have been had I remained against you?"

She hesitated, and Nick Carter smiled.

"You need not answer," he said. "I see that it would not. And permit me to tell you that *my* opinion of *you*, señorita, would have fallen below the zero mark had you been inclined to make me any other answer. One does not like to consider that one so beautiful as you are, who has set her heart upon the diadem of a queen or the crown of an empress——"

Carmen Carerra drew in a quick breath, and started away from the detective.

He was surprised at her action, but he guessed at once its cause. He had aimed better than he realized in making the suggestion of royalty to her. This, then, *was* the incentive which actuated this beautiful creature in her schemes. She *did* see ahead of her, in the distance, certain royal prerogatives which excited her ambitions. Indeed, she looked like a princess, or a queen, even an empress, as she stood there before the detective, in the full possession of her splendid beauty.

"How did you guess it?" she demanded, in a tone so low as to be almost a whisper.

"It was a random guess, señorita," replied Nick. "It is a logical conclusion that one who strives for empire might also seek to rule, after it is attained. I cannot even guess who your prospective consort might be, but——"

Again she started back, but angrily this time.

"You have no right to say such things," she replied coldly. "They form no part of our present controversy."

"No, they do not. You are right about that."

"I was instructed to offer you the alternative. I have done so. Have you chosen?"

"It would appear that I have done so; yes."

"Irrevocably?"

"My decisions are usually of that form, señorita."

"Then my duty is accomplished."

"You forget that you have not told me what the alternative is," said Nick, smiling.

"Do you need to be told?"

"Possibly not."

"South American politics do not pause at obstacles. Men who thrust themselves in the path of progress are ruthlessly shoved aside. If a grave is made for such a man, and a mound is raised over him, it is his own fault. He accepted the consequences."

She paused, and when the detective made no reply, turned abruptly and started toward the door. It opened as she approached it, and through the aperture came a man whom Nick at once guessed to be her father; the Don José to whom Adelina had referred.

He seemed to have a set purpose in mind; he acted, indeed, as if he had overheard all the conversation that had just taken place, for with a wave of his hand he dismissed his daughter from the room and came himself and stood where she had been standing before the detective.

"I have heard you make your choice, Mr. Carter," he said. "I have come now to tell you what that choice involves. It may be that when you have heard all I have to say you will think better of it."

CHAPTER XII.

THE RESCUE OF PATSY.

Don José Carerra remained with Nick Carter the better part of an hour, during which he used every argument in his power, and every force of sophistry that he possessed, to argue the detective into accepting the terms that had been offered him.

But it was of no avail, for Nick remained firm in his decision, that having once given his promise to a person, he would stand to it even though the heavens fell.

The alternative which Don José described to the detective might be explained by the one word "death." Nick had anticipated this, but he had been threatened so many times, in manners much similar to this one, that he had come to regard such threats as trivial compared with his duty to himself and others.

We need not repeat the conversation that was held between the two men. During it Don José conducted himself like the thoroughly accomplished gentleman he was, but through it all the mailed fist protruded through the velvet glove, and Nick Carter knew that this softly spoken man could be as relentless as the grave, and would carry out his purposes, if he could do so, without a thought of compassion for others.

Don José left the detective alone, passing through the door and locking it after him; an unnecessary proceeding, Nick Carter thought, since the cords which bound him were so strong and so firmly tied that there seemed little likelihood that he could even escape from the chair upon which he was seated.

Nevertheless, the man had no sooner gone, than the detective set to trying to free himself, straining at the cords as best he could; and while he did so, he scanned the room with his eyes for some article, or instrument, that would serve to assist him.

On the center table he saw a piece of onyx that had been broken in half, thus leaving jagged edges on either portion of it, which Nick believed that he could utilize if only he could reach one of them.

To do this he was obliged to roll from his chair to the floor, and thence across the room to the table, where he had extreme difficulty in raising himself to his feet and so lean against it; but he finally did so, and thus at last possessed himself of one of the pieces of onyx.

We need not describe his struggles, then, in attempting to sever the strands of cord which bound him. It was a long and a painful undertaking, accomplished with exceeding difficulty, but he finally did succeed. With one cord loosed, the remainder of his task was less difficult, and the detective was soon free again to move his great muscles as he would.

He lost no time after that, but hastened to the door past which Don José had disappeared, and inasmuch as he had not been deprived of any of his personal belongings, Nick Carter found no difficulty in opening it, notwithstanding the fact that it had been locked against him.

He was surprised by his surroundings, for he had supposed, until the bandage was removed from his eyes, that the Carerras were at the hotel where Adelina had called upon them. He did not know that they had been prepared to depart at the very time she made her call, and that the mansion on Riverside Drive, where they now were, although Nick Carter did not know the address, had been secured for use as a headquarters in furthering their schemes.

The detective stepped into the wide hall through which he had been carried while he was blindfolded, and paused there for an instant, listening.

From a room above he heard the murmur of voices, and he passed around the end of the balustrade and began to ascend the stairs, for Nick Carter had no thought of leaving that house until he had searched it thoroughly and had ascertained what had become of Patsy.

A door of one of the rooms on the second floor stood half-ajar, and through the opening Nick could see three persons seated inside the room. One of them he at first supposed was the same young woman who had removed the bandage from his eyes; but presently, when he listened to her voice, he knew that it was the sister and not the same one: he recognized that the difference between Carmen and Emilia might readily be determined by their speaking tones.

It was plain to the detective that Patsy was not within that room, and probably was not on that floor of the house, and he began to mount a second flight of stairs, which he reached without being obliged to pass the open door.

There, at the top of them, another interesting scene presented itself.

Again he looked into a room where the door stood half-ajar, and once more he saw the figure of Carmen Carerra, standing just as she had posed before him, although this time it was Patsy who was her confidant, and to whom she was talking.

Patsy was leaning back in the chair he occupied, and Nick wondered why his assistant made no effort to escape, until, looking more closely, he discovered that Patsy was a prisoner much as he had been himself, with the difference that irons had been locked around each of his ankles, and were again locked fast to the legs of the chair upon which he was seated.

"We have you both in our power now," Carmen was saying in the Spanish language, and she was talking in an animated way, evidently trying to convince Patsy to adopt some course she had already defined.

"It is useless, señorita," Patsy interrupted her before she could finish what she was about to say. "The things you tell me are very interesting. Judged from one standpoint—your own, of course—they seem capable of enlargement and of ultimate success. Your ambition to become, first, a princess, and ultimately a queen, or the empress of an empire which you and your father's followers will create, is praiseworthy enough from your own view-point, but it has nothing to do with my position in the matter. I serve Nick Carter, whom, you say, is now a prisoner in another room of this house. But, señorita, nobody has ever yet succeeded in keeping Nick Carter a prisoner a very long time. He has accepted for his client the other side of the question which interests you. If I were to accept your proposition, if I were to go to South America and engage in this undertaking with you, I would have to dishonor myself in every way, and that I could not even think of doing."

"Have you no ambition yourself?" she demanded, drawing farther away from him.

"Plenty," smiled Patsy; "but it does not take the form of yours. I don't believe that you are sufficiently bloodthirsty to consent to deliberate murders——"

"No man, or group of men, shall stand in our way," she interrupted.

"Then our conversation is unnecessary," returned Patsy, smiling again.

What more they might have said cannot be recorded here, for an interruption occurred at that moment which startled them both, and which amazed Nick Carter, who listened in the hallway.

It was the voice of Adelina, Patsy's wife, and it was followed almost instantly by an exclamation which Nick Carter recognized as coming from Jack Durland, the man whom he had sent to the Holland House to spy upon these people.

Adelina had exclaimed:

"There they are! There is the man who holds my husband a prisoner!" And Durland's voice uttered the words:

"Hands up, Don José, or I'll bore you with a forty-five!"

These exclamations, which startled Nick Carter, and also Carmen and Patsy, were replied to by Spanish oaths from Don José; but before Nick had time to act, Carmen Carerra came rushing from the room where Patsy was a prisoner, her eyes ablaze with fury, and with a weapon grasped tightly in one of her hands.

Nick knew that she would be a dangerous person to rush unexpectedly upon such a scene as was taking place on the floor below, and so, as she came through the doorway, he faced her, seized the wrist of the hand that held the weapon, and wrenched it from her grasp; then he forced her back inside the room, and closed the door and locked it.

"Señorita," he said coldly, "you observe that I have succeeded in freeing myself. Conditions are now transposed. Will you stand where you are immovably while I release Mr. Garven, or shall I be compelled to render you helpless while I am doing so?"

Carmen accepted the inevitable. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled coldly, bowing her head obediently to Nick Carter's will, and replied:

"I will declare a truce for the present."

Only a moment was required for Nick to release Patsy from the manacles which held him fast to the chair; then he turned again to Carmen.

"I will ask you to move quickly to pass ahead of us down the stairs," he said coldly. "Beyond the fact that you have been instrumental in the forcible abduction of two persons, of whom I am one, you have thus far, I believe, committed no crime against the laws of this country; and beyond liberating Patsy I have no errand here at present. If you are willing to continue the truce you have declared until Patsy and I and the two persons who have just entered the house, have gone away from it again, I am willing to consider the incidents of this evening as closed. What do you say?"

"I agree," she said coldly.

"Be good enough, then, to precede us down the stairs," he told her; and she led the way to that room on the second floor.

When they entered the room, Don José was standing beside the chair upon which he had been seated. His hands were extended above his head, and his features depicted the personification of baffled fury.

Donna Mercedes, his wife, remained in the chair she had occupied, apparently unmoved by what was taking place around her. At the opposite side of the room, Adelina and Emilia faced each other defiantly, and between them, on the floor, was lying a revolver which Nick guessed at once had been torn from Emilia's grasp by Patsy's wife.

It was a picture worth remembering, but it ended the moment that Nick and Patsy entered.

"I think our work is done for the present," said Nick Carter, advancing to the center of the group and facing Don José. "I shall make no charge against you, sir, for the things you have already done, and have threatened to do. I and my friends will depart in peace from this house; and in going, I advise you to make no delay in taking your own departure from the City of New York, and from the United States of America. This country is no hotbed for revolutionaries. I know what you are now, and what your purposes are, and I shall make a full report of your activities to the state department at Washington. Take my advice and leave New York as soon as possible, taking with you your blue chalk, your red chalk, and your white chalk, and all that they may mean."

He turned to Adelina, and said:

"Come!" and then, followed by her and Patsy, and with Jack Durland lingering a little behind them, he left the room and passed down the stairs.

Patsy's accidental adventure was over, and so was a part of the mystery of the chalk-marks that had so interested him when seated in the automobile, near the park entrance, was explained.

THE END.

The next Nick Carter story (No. 641) "will deal with the efforts made by Carmen Carerra to establish a South American empire, and will narrate how he succeeded in inducing an American to assist her. It will tell of the power of a woman's love. The story will be called "A Dream of Empire; or, Nick Carter and the Queen of Conspirators."

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THE RAT-PIT.

Hugh Whitestone, the youthful but eminent geologist, and his young friend Harry Kenson, gazed at a huge black castle that stood on the side of a bare limestone crag.

"So that is the home of Herr Professor Chernagora," said Hugh. "Now I wonder why the simple Montenegrins of those parts refuse to speak of him. I wonder why our guide, a strong man, was suddenly afflicted with a mysterious illness when I mentioned that we intended to visit the Herr Professor?"

The pair looked very trim as they stood there, clad in rough mountaineering-suits with leggings on their legs, and knapsacks upon their backs. The small geological pick-hammer which each carried in his belt, sufficiently explained the nature of their business in so out-of-the-way a part of Europe as Montenegro; but it must be said further that Harry had been Hugh's brightest pupil at the big school where the latter had taught science for a year or two, and that when Harry had to leave, owing to the death of his father, Hugh had immediately offered to take him on a long expedition to Java, just starting—to gather rare fossils for the Museum and collect at first hand geological data about the Balkan [illegible].

They had arrived at the huge limestone mountains in the south-east of the small kingdom of Montenegro after three weeks of pleasant tramping, but Harry, who had just begun to find the constant trudge, trudge, trudge a bit too much for him, had been looking forward with glee to a few days' stay in the house of Professor Chernagora. He was, therefore, all the more disappointed when he saw the forbidding castle that stood before them.

"It looks like an ogre's place," he said with an involuntary shiver. "I'm positive nothing about the professor, Hugh?"

"Nothing, except that he is a corresponding member of the Geological Society, has a unique collection of geological specimens, and that I have been, as you know, furnished with letters of introduction to him. Come on. If we peg away we should be inside in time for lunch."

"I suppose it is all right?" said Harry, as he hitched his knapsack more comfortably on his shoulder and stepped out beside his companion. "But I should very much like to know why the people here all refuse to speak to him—even seem to retire within five miles of his place?"

A stiff hour's climb, during which they forgot everything save the delight of overcoming obstacles, brought them to within fifty yards of the castle.

"It seems a dreary, deserted kind of place," said Harry as he stared at the gaunt walls and narrow unglazed windows. "It must be nearly as old as the hills. I wonder if the professor has any servants? There don't seem to be many about. Hello!"

From the bastioned gateway a puff of white smoke leaped, followed immediately by a sharp "crack" and a "phwit" as a rifle-bullet kicked a spurt of dust from the ground twenty feet to the right of them.

"Halt!" cried some one in the Slav tongue, and then an old, bent man, carrying a rifle at the "ready," came out of a tiny wicket-gate.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he yelled menacingly.

"We have letters of introduction to Professor Chernagora," Hugh replied promptly. "Is the learned professor within?"

"No, he's not," snarled the old man, though he lowered the rifle. "He stands before you. Advance and give me the letters."

"A nice kind of welcome this," murmured Harry, as Hugh, taking the letters from his pocketbook, held them out toward this decrepit-looking professor.

The old fellow opened them and read them quickly. Then he looked up, and they noticed that his eyes were black and yet bright—"like a rat's," thought Harry.

"You are welcome," he said, without holding out his hand, "follow me."

The inside of the castle proved to be just as forbidding as the outside. They passed through a regular maze of narrow winding passages until they stopped before a door which the professor unlocked and entered, signing to them to follow. They found themselves in a fairly large room which had been fitted up with some regard for modern standards of comfort.

"Sit down!" commanded the professor sharply. And both Hugh and Harry obeyed promptly, so commanding was the old man's tone.

"So you have come all these thousands of miles to see my collection," he continued, speaking in excellent English. "Well, I am sorry. I have given up geology and have thrown my specimens down the mountain. I have another collection now. You shall see that. Yes, you shall surely see that!"

The old man rubbed his hands and grinned horribly as he spoke, and Harry, for some reason he could not fathom, was conscious of a cold chill down his back as he listened to the uncanny cackling of the old man's laughter.

"I'm sorry we should have disturbed you for nothing, professor," said Hugh, "but we should be delighted to examine this new collection of yours, whatever it is. By the way, what is it?"

The old man laughed again.

"There is only one thing worth collecting," he chuckled. "You shall see. Never fear, you shall see! But you are tired and hungry. Let me show you to your room. Though I keep no servants I am always ready for visitors. Oh, yes, I am always ready for anything that may turn up." So saying he led them out of a room to another door. This he unlocked as he had done the other, but this time he stood aside to let them pass in before him.

They found themselves in utter darkness, and as they turned, bewildered, for an explanation they heard the grating of the key in the lock.

Harry dashed with all his force against the door; but only succeeded in hurting his shoulder.

"We are locked in!" he cried.

"Now, I wonder what this means?" asked Hugh as he felt in his pocket for the electric torch he always carried. "I'm afraid I've led you into trouble, Harry." He switched on his light, and they saw that they were in a bare cell without a window or any furniture.

Harry was examining the door.

"We can't break out," he said. "But most likely we shan't have to. Perhaps this is only the old gentleman's old-fashioned idea of hospitality. If it is I must say I don't think much of it. Ah, here he comes again."

A muffled step sounded outside, and the great bolts of the door shot back with a clang.

The professor appeared, smiling and rubbing his hands.

"I am very sorry," he mumbled. "I had mistaken the room. The guest-chamber is next door." He shot a keen, searching glance at them as he spoke, but neither Hugh nor Harry displayed signs of disbelief. "I will take you there now," he went on; "but first you must just glance at my collection. You must, really!"

Obediently, but with every nerve alert for the next development, they followed their weird host, who led them along more passages and into a long hall lighted with many smoky oil-lamps of curious shapes.

Harry gasped with horror as he realized that round the hall were ranged dozens and dozens of human skulls, grinning ferociously in the flickering light.

"My collection," said the professor proudly. "At least, when I say my collection, I err. It is the collection of my ancestors. This priceless aggregation of skulls represents the prisoners and enemies of my family for a good many generations back. Alas! I have not yet been able to add more than one skull. But I live in hope. I live in hope. My ancestors had a sure way. Anybody who did not please them, or who was inconveniently in the way, they threw into the rat-pit. That is it, that dark hole at the end of the hall. Come and see."

"You say you have added to the collection. You are a murderer!" burst out Harry; but Hugh's hand gripping his arm silenced him before he got any further.

"Say you so?" snarled the old man, whom they had followed to the edge of a horrible black hole yawning in the stone floor.

"Our young friend meant no offense," interposed Hugh quickly. "He does not yet understand how we scientists look at things." He gazed into the pit as he spoke and drew back with a shudder, for below he could hear the squealing of rats innumerable.

"Go round to the other side, you can get a better view from there," said the professor, and Hugh and Harry went.

They peered into the noisome hole and thought of those unfortunates who had died horrible deaths in it.

Suddenly Hugh grasped Harry and tried to throw him back out of the way. But he was too late. The broad stone on which they were standing turned under their feet and they were shot down into the rat-pit.

As they fell they heard the professor yelling gleefully.

"Two more heads for my collection!" he screeched. "The rats will pick you clean in three days!"

It was lucky for the two adventurers that they had not removed their knapsacks, for to the fact that Hugh struck the bottom of the pit squarely on his sack they probably owed their lives.

Harry fell sprawling on top of Hugh, and for a minute or so they lay breathless. They heard the echo of the treacherous, mad professor as he went away, and then they sprang to their feet.

Two or three giant rats had run across their bodies!

Hugh flung his arms protectingly round the shoulders of his young companion.

"Keep your pluck up, Harry, lad," he said. "Just half a second and we'll have some light on the situation. My electric torch will hold out for two or three hours yet!"

As he spoke he drew the torch from his pocket and pressed the switch. A clear, white beam shot out, which Hugh directed here and there, up and down, until they had made out that they were in a stone vault, all about ten feet square. Above their heads yawned the shaft down which they had been flung, and on one side, level with the floor, was a small opening, about two feet across and a foot high, from which gleamed the hungry eyes of half a hundred huge rats.

As the dazzling beam fell on them these noisome beasts backed away, and, at the same time, three or four of their fellows who had already entered the pit dashed for the hole.

"The creatures don't like the light," ejaculated Harry. "We're safe while it lasts."

"For that very reason," answered Hugh, "I am going to shut it off. We may need all the light we have later on. The question is, how are we going to get out of this?"

They were silent for a while, and from the direction of the hole in the wall they could hear distinctly the sound of rushing water.

"We have our picks," ventured Harry at length. "Couldn't we hew steps up the wall?"

"It would be a long and difficult job," was the answer; "and besides"—there was a sharp click and the white beam shot upward—"there is, as you see, a good four feet of roofing between the tops of our prison walls and the bottom of the well down which we came so quickly. No, I'm afraid that won't work. Try again, Harry."

Suddenly, from all sides, they were attacked by the rats which had silently poured into the cell. The ferocious beasts, many of them as big as small dogs, as they afterward discovered, flung themselves on them with horrible determination.

"The picks!" yelled Hugh, and drawing their sharp-pointed, heavy geological hammers, they backed, kicking and hacking, until their backs were against a wall.

For a minute or two they fought in darkness. It was horrible, ghastly! The rats fastened with teeth and claws on their clothes and worried them like terriers, only to be torn off and flung crashing to the ground. The picks were practically useless, but every now and again the points got home. They did most execution with their feet, stamping, crushing, kicking, for very life.

"The light! Where's the light, Hugh?" panted Harry.

"I've dropped it," was the breathless answer. "Protect your face, lad. That's what they'll go for!"

Even as Hugh spoke a huge creature landed on the boy's shoulder. With a scream of fear he turned to fling the thing from him. His foot slipped on a dead rat and he went down face foremost.

Instantly he was covered by a surging army of the fear'ul vermin. But as he fell his cheek struck something hard and round. It was the electric torch. In a second he had grasped it, found the button and pressed it. The room was flooded with light.

For a second or so the rats paused in their attack. In that time Hugh had helped Harry to his feet.

A horrible sight met their gaze. The floor of the cell was packed with their enemies, and still more were coming through the opening.

That pause, and the light, turned the tables. Gripping their hammers the hard-pressed chums attacked their foe. Now that they could see, every blow told, every kick accounted for one or more of the horrible beasts.

Suddenly the rats nearest the hole turned tail and bolted. Squirming and struggling they fled from the blinding whiteness of the electric torch and poured out of the cell, instantly followed by the rest. In an incredibly short time there was not a live rat left within sight, though there were scores of dead.

Hugh and Harry had not come off scathless. Harry's hands were bleeding from a dozen or so scratches and bites, while Harry, in addition to many other minor hurts, had his right ear badly torn. They set to work to dress these wounds at once, for Hugh knew well that rats' bites are likely to produce blood-poisoning.

They used the electric torch recklessly while they discussed their chances of ever getting out alive.

"They'll pull us down eventually, unless we can mend up their hole," said Harry.

"By jove! You've hit it, lad!" Hugh almost shouted. "We will stop up the hole. These flooring-blocks are the very thing. We can easily loosen them with our picks. Let's set about it at once."

Cheered by the thought of being so easily able to free themselves of the greatest of their present dangers, they fell to with a will and soon had up sufficient stone blocks to stop the rats' runaway.

As they were busy fitting them in the hole the sound of water again forced itself on their ears.

"I tell you what," said Hugh; "that water goes somewhere. If we could only get down to it we might be able to find a way out. Did you notice what was beneath those stones when we dug them out?"

"Soft rock."

"Precisely so. Well, I believe the water runs directly under us. What is to prevent us from digging down to it? I believe it is running in a proper culvert; did you notice how hollow the sound was?"

"Let's have a try, then!" answered Harry as he firmly wedged in the last stone. "We may as well do something as nothing, and, as you say, there's a chance. We shall have to work in the dark, though, for we really mustn't waste any more light."

Before they began they refreshed themselves from the stock of preserved and concentrated rations each carried in his knapsack. Then, stripping off their coats, they set to with a will.

"I'm through!" cried Harry. They had been working continuously for nearly seven hours, though for the last two they had only been able to work one at a time owing to the narrowness of the hole they had made. Harry's small pick had just broken right through into emptiness, and the sound of water told him that they had done what they set out to do.

"Take care," said Hugh. But as he spoke there was a crack and then a crash. Harry had fallen through the thin shell of stone and rock that separated him from the water-culvert.

Seizing the electric torch, Hugh dropped after him instantly.

He fell cleanly, and after a second or two of gasping struggle he found himself standing waist-deep in a swiftly moving torrent. The lamp revealed the fact that he was in a stone-faced tunnel, and that Harry was lying half in and half out of the water on a narrow ledge, and that he was either dead or unconscious.

A small army of rats were already investigating the boy's body.

Hugh dashed toward his friend and in a trice had snatched him from his perilous position, sweeping scores of rats into the water as he did so. Holding the boy on his shoulder high out of the water, he turned down-stream in the hope that the running water would lead him to fresh air and freedom.

In his rescue of Harry he had lost his lamp for good and all, so that now he had no light to cheer him on his way, and from the absolute blackness both in front and behind, it seemed that the tunnel might go on forever in the bowels of the earth.

Though he was walking with the current, progress was very slow, for the labor of moving his legs in the water was immense. Besides, young Harry was no light weight.

At first he blundered terribly in the intense blackness, striking both his own and Harry's head repeatedly as he cannoned against the walls of the tunnel, but after a while he managed to steer by means of the feel of the water.

Every now and again his hand or his arm struck against a rat, and from this he drew fresh hope, for he judged that unless there were some means of exit the cunning beasts would not be swimming up and down. It did not occur to him that what might be a very good exit for a rat might be impossible for a human being.

Presently in the distance he saw a faint glimmer, and at the same time he was conscious of the fact that the water was running more strongly. The stone at the bottom seemed to slope more.

He was very nearly exhausted, and the weight of young Harry seemed almost insupportable. Had it not been for the promise held out by that glimmering spot of light in the distance he must have given up the struggle. Larger and larger it got, and faster and faster ran the water until he had difficulty in keeping his feet.

Presently he was aware of an added roar in the noise of the water. Louder and louder it grew until he knew that he was approaching a cataract.

As the knowledge burst on him he came into the full daylight. He thought at first that the river he was in swept right out of the mountain, but almost immediately he saw that the water disappeared just before it came to the window-like opening in the steep cliff.

He moved toward the side and leaned against the wall to rest. The rats that had accompanied him swept past him. He watched them with fascinated eyes. How would they escape? Then he realized that they were the last survivors of the devouring horde he had swept from Harry's body. One by one he saw them disappear over the smooth edge of the cataract.

Unless he could devise some means of escape he and Harry would also be sucked down.

Cautiously he approached the edge until he could see that between the top of the fall and the ledge of the natural window in the rock there was a space of only some six feet. If he could bridge those six feet he was saved.

Many vines and creepers had made their way inside the "window" and hung over the black chasm into which the water roared. If only he could catch one he might be able to swing over.

In his eagerness he took an incautious step—his legs were swept from under him and he was carried under.

For one breathless second he paused on the edge of the water, and then with a mighty effort he tried to leap to safety across the spray-filled blackness. He flung himself free—and fell short.

A moment later he was holding by one hand to the branch of a tree that had slipped down inside the chasm. He struggled manfully, and was presently astride another branch. A few seconds later he was lying, with Harry by his side, outside the "window" and out of danger.

The expedition was ended, for both Hugh and Harry were badly shaken by their adventure; but before they made for home they reported the madness of the professor to the authorities. A week after they reached home a letter came, telling them that the old man had been found dead in the pit. He had evidently been preparing to descend, doubtless to collect their skulls, but had slipped and broken his neck.

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